

Slytherin Rising Part Three: Enemies of the Heir

by

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Chapter One

Escape From Privet Drive

August 1992. Lovegood Farm, Chudley, Devon. Nine thirty in the morning.

Marlene Lovegood, better known as Marlie, opened her eyes, feeling at peace with the world. The sun was shining in through a gap in the curtains, most of her holiday homework was done and she had very little to do today, other than test the magically adapted plasma globe she was working on. Of course, there was that request from her mother for a few tape recorders and microphones that could be concealed in an innocuous piece of jewellery, but apart from that, she had few problems. In the distance, she could hear hammering coming from her dad's workshop. She made a mental note to ask him later about the feasibility of making a digital sound recorder. After all, finding a tape that'd fit in a ring was pretty much a non-starter, unless her mother was prepared to start dressing all her agents like Narcissa Malfoy.

She was distracted by a knock at the door.

"Who's there?" Marlie yawned.

"Miss Marlie, you has visitors!" squeaked the voice of Sukey the Lovegoods' house elf.

"Visitors?" Marlie stared. "What, this early?" She looked at her radio alarm clock. Nine thirty four. What sort of sick individual was up and about at that time in the morning? "If it's a kid called Draco Malfoy, I don't live here. Throw him out."

"It is Mr. Fred and Mr. George from the Burrow, Miss Marlie." Sukey said, a little confused. Marlie groaned to herself. What on earth those two could want, she had no idea, but it was likely to involve trouble. Getting up, she hastily pulled on her dressing gown and slippers and followed Sukey downstairs.

Fred and George were waiting for her in the living room. Both raised eyebrows when Marlie walked in.

"Nice outfit, Lovegood." Fred grinned. "Pink suits you. It's her colour, don't you think George?"

"Indubitably, Fred. And that pink dressing gown goes so well with the Barbie nightdress and fluffy bunny slippers too."

"When you have quite finished dissecting my nightwear." Marlie said irritably. "What do you want? It's a little early to see you two up and about, isn't it?"

"Well, we didn't want to waste any time." said George. "Marlie, we need your help."

Marlie curled gracefully into an armchair with one fluid movement. "Ah. A favour is required. I should have guessed. What exactly do you want doing?"

"Not us. It's our brother Ron. He's a bit worried." said Fred.

"And this concerns me how?" Marlie purred. "I do hope you don't want his room Feng Shui'd. It'll cost you if you do."

"He's worried about Harry." George said simply. Marlie sat up. Harry Potter's welfare was something else altogether.

"Harry? What, Potter? What's wrong with him?" she asked sharply.

"That's just it. We don't know. No one does. No one's heard a thing from him since he left King's Cross. It's as if he's vanished off the face of the earth. Errol's on his last legs what with all the letters Ron's been sending him, but there's been no reply. And we're worried about him." Fred said, his usual levity vanishing. "Ron keeps saying how Harry hates his Muggle relatives, how they're always being cruel to him, how they spent the ten years before he started Hogwarts mistreating him. And we're worried something bad may have happened to him."

Marlie gestured helplessly. "Boys, I feel your pain, but what can I do? I'm hardly a social worker, am I? And I'm at the other end of the country."

George grinned. "You might be, but your mates aren't, are they?"

Fred took up the argument. "We were discussing the situation ourselves last night, how we could go over there and see for ourselves what was going on. A reconnaissance mission, you know. But we realised that we didn't know where Harry lived."

"So we went through our mental address books, trying to think if we knew anyone who came from Surrey. And then it hit us." said George.

"Tyler and Martin." Fred grinned. "Tyler and Martin who live practically next door to each other, and as you're so fond of bragging to us, live virtually round the corner from young Harry."

Marlie began to see where this was heading. "Fred, are you asking what I think you're asking?"

"Come on, Marls, please?" George asked. "After all, Lu Martin's a friend of his too. And she knows where he lives. If you were to ask her nicely if she'd like to check up on Harry for us, make sure he's OK, I'm sure she would. And I'm sure Tyler'd be up for it, she loves a good adventure. Please?"

Marlie thought. If Harry really was in trouble, she could hardly stand by and let him suffer, could she? And Luella was a friend of his after all.

"All right." she said casually. "All right. I'll see what I can do."

Harry Potter stared miserably into space. He'd never felt so alone, so miserable, before. And given his childhood, that was saying something. He lived with his aunt and uncle, Vernon and Petunia Dursley, at Number Four Privet Drive, and had done ever since his parents had died eleven years ago. And it had not been fun. His parents had been mages, and so was he. The Dursleys, however, were not, and they hated everything about the magical community. And they'd never lost an opportunity to mistreat Harry.

That was how things had been right up until his eleventh birthday, when he'd received a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry telling him he was a wizard. And off he'd gone, to spend the best year of his life learning magic and making friends, both a novel experience for him. But now, school was over for the summer and he was back with the Dursleys. And ever since they'd found out he wasn't allowed to do any magic over the holidays, he'd been locked in his room virtually round the clock.

Harry sat huddled up on his bed, staring out of the window. What he wouldn't give now for a letter from Ron or Hermione, his two best friends. Or any other witch or wizard, just to prove it was real, that it hadn't been a dream. But he'd heard nothing, nothing from any of them. Not even Ron, who'd promised to ask him to stay with him. Had they all forgotten him? Did they really care about him at all? It was this apparent neglect from his friends, more than anything else, that really hurt. Trying not to cry, he tried to think of something else.

Think of his cousin, Dudley Dursley really suffering. Now that cheered him up. Unfortunately, it was unlikely to happen. Dudley was spoilt rotten by his parents, and he was the leader of his gang. There were only two people who had ever made Dudley suffer, and they were a couple of Slytherin witches two years older than Harry, who also lived in the area and had been to school with him. Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. Harry wished they were here now. If anyone could get him out of here, it was those two. They had a reputation for cunning, ingenuity and sheer nerve. And while he didn't know Deanna Tyler that well, Luella he did think of as a friend. He cursed himself for not having got her address and phone number. If he'd known where she lived, he could have met up with her over the holidays. It would be someone who could have kept track of him and raised the alarm in case of something like this happening. Too late now.

A sound distracted him. Was it... the door being unlocked? Hardly daring to believe his ears, he turned to see. Sure enough, the door swung open, and Aunt Petunia was standing there. However, she didn't seem to notice him at all. She was just staring blankly into the distance, arms hanging limply by her sides. And standing next to her, pushing past her into the room was...

"Luella!" he yelled with delight. Leaping off the bed and racing towards her, he flung his arms around her and hugged her for all he was worth. "Oh, Luella, am I glad to see you!"

Luella Martin laughed and extricated herself. "What did I do to deserve that? I'm glad to see you too Harry. What gives? We thought you'd forgotten us all!"

"Yeah, Potter, is your girlfriend not worth one lousy owl?" another voice drawled. Harry looked up, blushing. Deanna Tyler had followed Luella in and was watching them both with a grin on her face.

"Deanna, behave yourself." Luella said crossly. "Ignore her, Harry, she's just teasing."

"Oh yeah?" Deanna grinned. "You didn't have to put up with her pacing the floor saying 'Why hasn't he owled? Why hasn't he owled?' for the past month. Do you two want any privacy, by the way?"

Luella let go of Harry and walked firmly over to Deanna, raising a hand to slap her. Deanna dived out of the way, laughing. Luella turned back to Harry.

"Ignore her. She's always like that. Anyway, what's up, mate? Why no owls, eh? You've had us all worried sick." Luella's smile did not reach her eyes, which were giving Harry a very concerned look indeed.

"Couldn't. Uncle Vernon locked Hedwig in her cage and I can't write to anyone. And as soon as they found out I couldn't do magic over the holidays, they locked me in here. They won't let me go back to Hogwarts!"

"Not let you go back!" Luella gasped. "Well then, we've got to do something about that. Deanna?" Luella turned to Deanna, who wasn't listening. "Deanna, what are you doing?"

Deanna had produced a notepad, pen and tape measure and was examining the bars on the window, taking notes.

"Doing what we came here for." she replied crisply. "Reconnaissance. How thick do you reckon the walls are, Harry? And what's on the other side?"

Harry told her, bewildered. "But why do you want to know?"

"Your mates Fred and George asked Marlie to ask us to come over here and check on you." Deanna said. "So here we are. And while we're here, I thought I'd take a few notes, for when we all come back and bust you out of here."

"You're going to bust me out?" Harry said in wonder. "When?"

"We don't know yet. We need to link up with the Weasleys first and discuss things, but I'd say there's a pretty good chance you'll be out of here by the end of the week." said Deanna calmly, returning her attention to the walls.

Harry felt his heart leap at the thought of being free. "Thank you! You two are something else, you know that?"

"We know." Deanna said absently. Harry noticed Aunt Petunia still standing there, keys dangling from one hand, eyes staring out of the window.

"What did you do to her?" he asked in astonishment. Deanna grinned at Luella, who coughed nervously.

"Probably best you don't know." Luella said delicately. "Don't worry, she'll be fine, and she won't remember a thing. Harry, you look starving, fancy some lunch? I'll fix you up with something to eat while Sherlock here gets on with her work." She indicated for Harry to follow her. Harry did so, his mood greatly improved.

It was several hours later that the two girls left the house. Harry had been re-imprisoned in his bedroom, after being given a good lunch, a brief spell in the garden sunbathing and a good shower. Petunia Dursley was sitting in the lounge, coming out of her trance with no memory of anything that had happened. And Deanna and Luella were heading purposefully back to Luella's house with a whole heap of notes covering just about everything anyone could ever need to know about Number Four Privet Drive and its inhabitants.

"That went rather well, don't you think Lu?" Deanna grinned.

"Absolutely, Dee. The Twin Avengers strike again! Now what?"

Deanna patted her notepad. "We go back to yours, then we get on your computer and type all this up into something intelligible. When we're done, we ring Marlie and tell her the good news, then fax the whole thing over to her. She does have a fax machine, doesn't she?"

"I think so. Her mum's got all sorts of Muggle contacts, she needs to keep in touch. I'm sure Marlie gave me the number. Excellent. We can have this done by teatime, and Marlie can owl it all to the Weasleys by tonight." Luella grinned. "Did we tell Harry he'd be free by the end of the week? If I know the twins, they'll have him out of there by tomorrow."

"Devious as Slytherins, those two." remarked Deanna. "And they've enough Gryffindor courage to follow through with all their crazy plans. Aren't you glad they're mates of ours?"

Luella nodded. "Very glad indeed, I'd hate to be their enemies. Come on, we're nearly here. Let's get started."

Sure enough, the whole report had been faxed to an amazed Marlie by six o'clock that evening ("a fourteen page Word document? With a scanned in street plan and an Ordnance Survey map? You two don't do things by half, do you?") and Luella and Deanna had retired to their separate beds in their separate homes very satisfied with the day's events.

However, that night, Luella found herself awake and thirsty. Sneaking quietly downstairs to get a glass of water, she idly glanced out of the window. And saw what looked like a flying car go past. She rubbed her eyes, blinking. Was she dreaming still? She looked again. It was still there and heading in the direction of Privet Drive. And now that she looked, she could see three figures in the car, and the streetlights reflecting off their heads made it look as if their hair had a definite reddish tinge to it. She grinned to herself. Looked like the twins were moving in to action all right.

A phone call to Marlie a few days later confirmed it.

"Yeah, the plan worked perfectly. Fred and George borrowed their dad's specially engineered flying car, used your directions to get to Privet Drive, and busted Harry out. They said to say thank you to you guys, by the way. Your information was most helpful. I still cannot believe you drew a scale drawing of the house layout, by the way. And measuring the thickness of the walls? You guys scare me." Marlie sounded concerned.

"Deanna did all the note-taking, not me!" Luella grinned. "She's very thorough when she wants to be."

"Thorough? Obsessive is the word I was thinking of. Do you have any idea how detailed that report was??"

"Of course I do, I was the one stuck with typing it. And scanning in the drawings, and the maps, and putting it all together so it looked pretty. I'm telling you, Deanna sure knows how to delegate. If she put that much effort into her schoolwork, she'd never get a D again. So how is Harry, anyway?"

"He's fine. Mrs. Weasley is feeding him up nicely. I'm going over there myself later to check on him in person, have a Quidditch session with the boys, that sort of thing, so I'll let you know. Oh, what are you doing next Wednesday?"

"Nothing. Why?" Luella asked curiously.

"We're all going to Diagon Alley to get our school stuff. You and DT are welcome to come along. In fact, I'd love you to, because otherwise it's just me and the Weasleys. I'd feel outnumbered by all those Gryffindors."

"OK, count us in. I could do with the trip out. So, Marlie. What do you know about this Gilderoy Lockhart character then? Because my book list has just arrived and it seems to consist of his entire works."

Marlie's usual Slytherin composure abandoned her completely. "Gilderoy Lockhart! Oh, he's such a fantastic wizard! A real celeb! He's done all sorts of cool things, taking out banshees, vampires and ghouls! We're going to learn so much from those books, I can just tell." Marlie was practically gushing, and although Luella couldn't see her, she could have sworn that Marlie was going red.

"Well, if you say so, although Deanna's never mentioned him and I'm sure she would have if he'd been that good." Deanna, having been raised by one of the country's top Aurors, had devoured tales of fighters of the Dark Arts where other children had watched Disney films.

"Oh, what does she know?" Marlie said carelessly. "All her books are about people who lived over a hundred years ago. All very fascinating I'm sure, but hardly relevant to this day and age is it? Lockhart's part of the here and now! A Dark Arts fighter for the 20th Century, don't you know! And sooo handsome!"

"Handsome, is he?" Luella grinned. "That explains a lot."

"Lu!" Marlie snapped. "Behave. Now, are you coming along on Wednesday or not?"

"Yes, yes, count me in." Luella told her. "We'll be there."

"And where has she got to now?" inquired Deanna, more than a little irritated. It was now Wednesday and the two girls were standing in the lobby of Gringotts bank, waiting for Marlie Lovegood and Rianne Stormosi to turn up.

"They'll turn up." said Luella calmly. "Rianne's pretty punctual and it's unlikely that Marlie'll want to waste any time getting her hands on those Lockhart books."

"Or indeed the author." remarked Deanna dryly. "Apparently Lockhart's quite the stud."

"So Marlie said. Reckon she fancies him, Dee?"

"Marlie fancies anything remotely male. Fussy she is not." Deanna indicated the book list again. "Our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher must be the same way inclined. Funny though, Mum doesn't have any of these, and she's got most of the textbooks on that subject. I hope Lockhart knows what he's talking about."

"What did your mum say when she saw the booklist? Has she read any of them?" Luella asked with interest.

"That's the weird thing. She didn't say anything, just rolled her eyes, laughed, and told me I'd better take a few books from her collection as well. And when I asked if Auntie

Mel used any Lockhart books on the Auror training programme, she seemed to think the idea was hilarious." Deanna said thoughtfully. "You know, I'm not at all sure she thinks much of him."

Luella was about to reply, when she heard a voice shouting her name. She turned to see a young girl with lots of bushy brown hair running across the bank towards them, followed by two rather nervous looking adults who Luella guessed must be her parents.

"Hermione!" Luella smiled as the girl propelled herself into Luella's arms. "Are you here to get your school things as well?"

"Oh yes. We're meeting up with Harry and the Weasleys later. Oh, these are my parents by the way. Mum, Dad, this is Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. They're friends of mine from school."

"So you're Luella!" Mrs. Granger smiled. "Hermione's told us so much about you! How are you doing at school?"

"Very well, thank you." Luella replied. "I'm studying for my OWLS at the moment." "Decided what you're going to do with all this knowledge yet?" Mr. Granger asked. "Hermione's got it all worked out already. Going to be an Author."

"Auror, Dad!" Hermione said, going red. "They hunt down Dark Mages."

The Grangers exchanged indulgent looks. "That's our Hermione, knows it all." Mr. Granger said, grinning fondly. Hermione squirmed, embarrassed.

"Stop it Dad, you're embarrassing me!"

"Oh Doug, leave her alone." Mrs. Granger said. "Now, Hermione, where do we go to change our money?"

Hermione looked a little confused. "Oh, er, I'm not really sure. Either of you two know?"

Deanna smiled and pointed them in the right direction. "That queue over there. Try not to let the goblins put you off. They're pretty honest, they do have a reputation to protect after all."

Mr. and Mrs. Granger thanked her and joined the queue. Hermione lingered to chat.

"I'm so sorry about them! My Dad's always getting stuff wrong about magical things. I think he does it deliberately just to annoy me sometimes."

"Ah, forget it Herm. Parents are always like that. They have no purpose other than to embarrass their children. This is why I leave mine at home." Luella reassured her.

"I don't suppose you've seen Stormer and Lovegood on your travels have you?" Deanna asked. "Only we're meant to be meeting them here."

Hermione shook her head. "No. Don't suppose you've seen the Weasleys or Harry, have you?"

"Not seen Harry since we went round his house last week." Deanna told her. "So, I take it he is safely with the Weasleys then?"

"Yes, Ron told me all about their rescue operation." Hermione said disapprovingly. "Honestly, stealing Mr. Weasley's car like that!" She looked up sharply. "You two went round there?"

"Who do you think did the reconnaissance?" Deanna said idly. "Yeah, me and Lu went round there after Marlie told us no one had heard from him in a while. And after we'd told Marlie what was up, she sent word to Fred and George who had him out of there that very night."

Hermione was impressed. "You spoke to him? But wasn't he locked in his room? How did you persuade his aunt and uncle to let you in?"

Deanna and Luella exchanged looks. Deanna was grinning, while Luella shifted uncomfortably.

"Er, natural charm." Luella said hastily.

"Yes, our Lu's very persuasive when she wants to be." grinned Deanna. She looked up as someone walked past the open doorway. Someone so big, the shadow completely cut off the light.

Hermione recognised the figure immediately. "Hagrid!" she squealed, running out of the bank. Then she saw the small boy standing next to him. "Harry! Harry, over here!" Racing down the flight of stairs at the entrance, she rushed over to Harry and hugged him. Deanna and Luella followed her.

"Harry, how are you? What happened to your glasses?" Hermione was asking in surprise. "Oh, hello Hagrid." She turned back to Harry who, Luella noticed, was covered in soot and whose glasses were shattered.

Deanna had also noticed. "Potter, what happened to you? You look like you've had a nasty accident with a coal-hole."

"Close." Harry said. "I got lost on the Floo network and ended up in the wrong place."

Deanna grinned. "Oh yeah? Where'd you end up? I remember when Luella tried using the Floo network for the first time. Now that was fun. She was aiming for Lovegood Farm, that's Marlie's place, and... well, I won't say where she came out at, but suffice it to say she discovered a whole load of alternative uses for a pair of handcuffs and a tub of melted chocolate. Man alive, the trouble Mum got into over that. You should have heard the comments her colleagues were making afterwards."

Luella wished the ground would swallow her up. "Deanna, shut up! It wasn't my fault the stupid Floo network mistook Lovegood Farm for Lovecraft Adult Supplies.

"Anyway, Harry, where did you find yourself?" she asked, desperately trying to divert the attention from herself.

"Knockturn Alley." Harry said quietly. Deanna stopped sniggering immediately.

"*Knockturn Alley??*" she said in a stunned whisper. "My god Harry, are you all right?" She was staring at him, a horrified look in her eyes. Luella shot a glance at Hermione who looked as confused as she was.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Hagrid found me." Harry reassured her.

"Well, thank Hecate you did! Knockturn Alley, my god, my god." Deanna was whispering, trembling with fear.

"It's all righ' now, Deanna." Hagrid said cheerfully. "Found 'im just in time. Ah were there fer some Flesh-Eatin' Slug Repellent and ran inter 'im just outside Borgin an' Burkes in a righ' old state. Yeh shoulda seen 'im before ah cleaned 'im up, he looked a righ' mess. Yeh won' be goin' there again in a hurry, will yeh now, Harry?"

Harry shook his head. Deanna seemed to have recovered but was still looking pale.

"I should hope not! Knockturn Alley, my god, anything could have happened!" She shuddered.

"But Hagrid, what *is* Knockturn Alley?" Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

"A place yeh don' wanna be." Hagrid said firmly.

"It's where all the really dodgy Dark Arts stuff is sold." Deanna said quietly. "You get a lot of strange people hanging around there, it's really dangerous. You'd have to be an Auror or an Dark Mage to come out of there unscathed. Mum took me there once."

"Your *mum??*" Hermione gasped. "But she's an Auror! Why would she take you there?"

"Because I asked." Deanna said miserably. "In fact, every time we went to Diagon Alley, I always begged her to take me there. You know how kids are, always whining to their parents about things. Well, that was me. I was curious about what was kept there, wanted to see it more closely, wanted to know why everyone else kept their heads down and pretended it wasn't there. Eventually Mum got so sick of my whining, she took me down there and showed me exactly why. After about ten minutes, I was screaming, crying, begging for her to take me home. I was only six. I've never been so scared in all my life. And I've never wanted to go back." Deanna shivered, despite the warmth of the sun. "Dear Gaia, not for all the gold in Gringotts would I go back there. I had nightmares for weeks!"

They were interrupted by the Weasleys running towards them.

"Harry, there you are!" Ron gasped as he staggered up to them. "We thought we'd lost you!"

Mr. Weasley was next on the scene. "We hoped you'd only gone one grate too far... Molly's on her way now... worried sick, we were!"

Mrs. Weasley was next to arrive, dragging her daughter Ginny behind her. "Oh Harry - oh my dear - you could have been anywhere - are you all right?" She let go of Ginny and swept him into a hug.

"Where did you come out?" Ron asked curiously.

"Knockturn Alley." Hagrid said firmly.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley reacted in much the same way Deanna had.

"Knockturn Alley?" they gasped. Mrs. Weasley immediately swept Harry into another hug. "Oh my dear! Hagrid, if you hadn't found him!

Fred and George were in awe. "Knockturn Alley? Brilliant!"

"It is not brilliant!" Deanna snapped. "It's the dodgiest place in London!"

Both twins turned to look at her in surprise. "You're surely not scared, are you Tyler?" Fred asked.

"Yeah, I'd've thought with your background, you'd be well up for going there." George remarked.

"I have been there." Deanna said shortly. "I'm not going back."

"Been where?" came a girl's voice. Luella turned to look. Rianne had just turned up, with Marlie trailing behind her at her usual leisurely pace. Marlie did not believe in wasting energy unnecessarily.

"Harry took a wrong turning on the Floo and ended up in Knockturn Alley." Luella told Rianne.

"Knockturn Alley, you're kidding!" Rianne gasped. "What was it like, we've never been allowed anywhere near it!"

"Not you too." Deanna snapped. "Ri, it's a haven for Dark Mages, Dark creatures and all sorts of things best not mentioned. Trust me, if you did go in, you wouldn't want to stay!"

"When did you go to Knockturn Alley?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "I'm amazed your mother let you, mine certainly wouldn't."

"Mine not only let me, she took me there herself, showed me round, let me look at all the stuff on show and explained in great detail exactly how they obtained it all and what it was all used for." Deanna shivered. "Put me off for life. Which was probably the idea, but still..."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were giving her pitying looks. "You're Caitlin Tyler's daughter, aren't you?" Mr. Weasley said kindly.

"Yes." Deanna said warily. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley exchanged sympathetic glances.

"How is your mother?" Mr. Weasley asked gently. "It's been a while since we heard from her, always did keep herself to herself. Everything all right at home?"

"Yes, things are fine." Deanna said, giving slightly concerned looks to her friends.

"Well, if things ever get too much for you, or if you need to talk, you know you're quite welcome to visit us whenever you want." Mrs. Weasley said, in that same strangely kind, pitying voice.

"Thank you, Mrs. Weasley." Deanna said, looking rather uncomfortable. Luella swiftly decided to rescue her friend.

"Hermione, your parents must have finished changing their money by now." Luella said brightly. "Shall we go in, check up on them? I expect everyone else needs to get money out too."

Harry caught on immediately. "Yes, I really need to get some Galleons in my purse. Let's go!"

And with that, they all said goodbye to Hagrid and filed into Gringotts. Deanna and Luella, having already stocked up on magical cash, decided to wait outside in the sunshine for them. Luella sat down on the steps and waited for Deanna to start talking. Which, after flinging herself down to sit next to her friend, she did.

"I hate that so much!" she said through gritted teeth. "I mean, I know they meant well, but I am really, really, *really* fed up with people just *assuming* that just because there's only me and Mum at home that I am some kind of forlorn little waif who needs constant love and affection. See, Lu, this is why I like your parents, they treat me normally, although your mum does overfeed me whenever I'm over there."

"Which I've never ever seen you turn down." observed Luella. Deanna grinned.

"Well, she is such a good cook, I can hardly refuse, can I? Unlike my mother who could probably burn water." Deanna fell quiet and gazed into the distance, all sorts of unspoken thoughts crossing her mind. At length, she spoke. "I'll tell you who else treats me normally. Snapey."

"Snape?" Luella raised an eyebrow. "You're not telling me you actually like him? I thought you couldn't stand him."

Deanna shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I don't. I mean, I didn't. But I don't know. I know he's a slimy bastard and all, but... in his own twisted way, he's been pretty good to me. He was there for me when I was spying on Crabbe for us. He was there after I found out my dad was a Death Eater. And he gave me Nestra." Deanna smiled wistfully. Clytemnestra the peregrine falcon had been a gift from Snape to replace her

previous owl, which had died after an altercation with Malfoy. Nestra, as Deanna called the bird, had more than made up for the loss, with Deanna proclaiming her as the coolest present she'd ever been given. She turned sharply to Luella. "He's not so bad really, is he?"

"You're easily bribed, aren't you? Let's hope the future of humanity never rests on you having to resist the offer of a peregrine falcon from Voldie." Luella grinned.

Deanna laughed. "That's not what I mean, and you know it. It's just that... Snape cares but doesn't embarrass any of us by actually showing it. I like that, you know? Then there's the way he always comes up with the best lines. Gods damn it, to be able to always have the best put-downs at the ready...! Malfoy would be in fear of his life, or at least his ego, which in his case amounts to pretty much the same thing."

"Deanna, you always do have the perfect put-down ready." Luella pointed out.
"Anyone would think you'd been taking lessons from him."

"Ah, you flatter me. But it's not just sarcasm! He just is cool. I mean, I could sit and talk to him for hours, you know. I bet he's had a fascinating life."

Luella smiled. Yes, Deanna was probably right. She remembered a chance remark of Professor Snape's last year. "I've seen things all right. Don't know if you could call it living though. More like surviving." She felt her spine tingle as she recalled that encounter in his office. Snape healing a cut on her face then gently wiping the blood off her fingers, those deep black eyes gazing into hers. She quickly banished the thought from her mind.

"Fascinating is one word. Scary and dangerous are others. He lived during the Voldemort Years, Dee. Hardly a walk in the park."

"I'd still love to hear about it though." Deanna said wistfully. She blushed suddenly.

"What?" Luella asked, curious. "What is it?"

"You'll probably laugh at me for this." she said shyly.

"No I won't." Luella said gently. "Come on, tell me."

"Well, it's just that... no I can't tell you. It's just too embarrassing."

"What could be so bad? You don't fancy him, do you?" Luella asked, beginning to grin.

"No!" Deanna snapped. "But, well... You know I don't have a dad?"

"Yes."

"Well..." Deanna blushed fiercely. "This is really embarrassing. Promise you won't tell anyone?"

"Promise!"

"Not even Ri and Marlie? In fact, come to think of it, especially not Ri and Marlie."

"I swear it. Come on, tell me." Luella was deeply curious by now.

"Well... all right then." Deanna leaned closer. "You know I don't have a dad?"

"Yes."

"Well, if I could choose someone, if I could have anyone in the world as my father..." She paused, gazing into the distance. "I'd choose Snape." She dropped her eyes suddenly, blushing again. "Told you it was embarrassing! Look, let's drop it. Forget I said anything."

Luella felt a chill go through her. Deanna was closer to the truth than she'd ever imagined. For Professor Snape was indeed her father. However, Deanna was unaware of this, primarily because Snape had managed to ruin Caitlin Tyler's life in the process and really screw up Deanna's childhood. While Luella didn't particularly bear any grudge against Snape for that, she was all too aware that Deanna most certainly would, and it would be all the more painful if Deanna got close to him.

"What brought all this on?" Luella asked, trying to sound nonchalant. "This time last year, you couldn't stand him."

Deanna smiled gently. "You know how when I found out about my dad, I went to Snape to ask if he knew who he was?"

"I remember. Why?"

A look of nostalgia settled on Deanna's face. "He asked me why I wanted to know. And I told him. Told him what the bastard had done to Mum and me, how he'd wrecked her life and robbed me of a normal childhood. You know what Snapey did?"

"What?" Luella asked curiously.

"He listened." Deanna said quietly. "And comforted me. I ended up crying on his shoulder, telling him things I'd never told anyone before. No one's ever done that before, not an adult anyway. I don't think I've ever felt so protected, so safe. So..." Deanna hesitated. "So loved." she said quietly.

Luella felt a pang of jealousy stab at her. The thought of inventing a sob-story of her own and going to Snape with it flitted briefly across her mind before reason prevailed. Stop it, he's a teacher, she told herself.

Deanna was speaking again, chin resting on her knees, eyes staring into space. "Right there and then, I realised what I'd missed out on all my life. And since then, I've been imagining what it would have been like if he and Mum had brought me up. Just picturing me and him doing all these little father-daughter bonding things. Dear gods, it's all I can think of these days, making him care about me, making him proud of me.

I want it so badly, and yet he's not my father, it'll never happen. It hurts, Lu. It really hurts." She buried her face in her hands. Luella reached out to comfort her, the feeling of wanting something out of reach all too familiar. At the same time, Luella was aware of this growing sense of fear for her friend. Too late to try and keep Deanna from getting too close to Snape. It looked horribly like she was already in far too deep. Luella didn't know the details of how Deanna had been fathered, not for certain, but she was now absolutely sure that it would destroy Deanna to find out.

"Deanna." she whispered. "Deanna, it's OK." Deanna looked up, eyes glittering.

"I keep imagining him and Mum falling in love, you know?" she said quietly. "The two of them getting married, and him moving in at home. It'd be so cool, Lu. Having him as a stepfather'll do, if nothing else. Don't think it'll happen though."

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Deanna, last time anyone suggested Snape might be sleeping with your mother, you raced straight over to his office to kill him."

"That was different!" Deanna said dismissively. "The way Malfoy put it, it sounded like they were having some seedy affair, like he was just lusting after her. I'm not putting up with anyone screwing my mother like she's some kind of tart. She deserves better. But if they were in love, really in love..." She turned to Luella, eyes burning. "If they were happy together, I wouldn't stand in their way. In fact, not only would I not stand in their way, I'd be bridesmaid at the wedding and do it gladly, even though I hate wearing dresses. If it meant I'd get a normal family, at long last."

Luella didn't get a chance to reply. Marlie came bounding out of the bank, moneybags in hand, with Rianne following.

"All right, are you two finished? Well, I've money to spend and this is a fine day for spending it. Let's hit the shops!"

An hour later, the four girls arrived at Flourish and Blotts. Harry, Ron and Hermione were already there, trying to get in. This was by no means as easy as they might have expected, for there was a vast crowd, composed mostly of middle-aged witches, all fighting to get in as well.

"What's going on here?" Deanna asked in surprise. "Is Tom Jones making a guest appearance or something?"

"Close." Harry told her. He pointed to a banner stretched across the building, proclaiming "*GILDEROY LOCKHART will be signing copies of his autobiography MAGICAL ME today 12.30pm - 4.30pm*"

"Gilderoy Lockhart!" Marlie and Hermione squealed in unison.

"We can actually meet him!" cried Hermione. Marlie whipped out a mirror and began frantically adjusting her hair.

"Oh my god, I look such a mess!" she said, examining her face in panic. "If only I'd known, I'd have put some make-up on or something."

"Stop fussing." Rianne told her. "You look fine."

"I do not!" Marlie shrieked. "I look hideous, and I swear I've got the beginnings of a spot coming through."

"Lovegood, you don't fancy him, do you?" Deanna asked, beginning to grin. Marlie blushed crimson.

"No." she said unconvincingly. "I just want to look my best, that's all."

"Marlie, you've got more admirers than anyone else in the school with the exception of your older brother." Luella said. "I wouldn't worry! Come on, the crowd's thinning out a bit. Shall we go in?"

The seven of them somehow managed to fight their way into the shop. The queue for book signings wove its way twice round the store and back. Deanna immediately grabbed a basket and a copy of all the Lockhart books on the list.

"Going to get them signed, Tyler?" Ron asked in surprise. "Never had you down as a Lockhart fan. Looks can be so deceiving!"

Deanna gave him a look that could freeze lava. "I'm going to get them signed so I can sell them on for double the money to next year's first years. Do you have a problem with that, Weasley?"

"No, Tyler." Ron said hastily. He decided to change the subject. "Hey, there's Mum and Dad over there. Let's queuejump."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin." Rianne commented, as she ducked under the barriers. The others followed.

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were standing near the front, their daughter Ginny next to them.

"Is that him, Mum?" Ginny was bouncing up and down with excitement. "Is it? Is that Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Yes, dear." Mrs. Weasley said rather distractedly, fiddling nervously with her robes and patting her hair. "Ginny, do be quiet, you don't want to put him off, do you?"

Ginny did shut up, but not because of anything her mother had said. Her eyes had fallen on Harry, and she was now hiding behind her father, blushing furiously. Mr. Weasley greeted the children with a smile.

"Hello there. Come to get your books signed too?"

Hermione and Marlie both nodded breathlessly. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, standing next to the Weasleys, nodded knowingly.

"Hermione's quite the little Lockhart fan, aren't you Hermione?" Mr. Granger said genially.

"Yes, ever since we got the book list, it's been Lockhart this and Lockhart that." Hermione's mother smiled warmly. "Apparently he's quite the celebrity."

"He's amazing!" breathed Marlie. "His books are so exciting, I've read them already, he really knows his stuff! Far more interesting than those dusty old tomes of my mother's."

"Marlie's mother runs the Department of Dark Arts Eradication." Mr. Weasley explained. "So Marlie knows what she's talking about."

"My mum doesn't seem to think much of Lockhart." Deanna chipped in. "I think she thinks he's sold out."

"Blimey." Ron said in surprise. "I never thought I'd have something in common with Tyler's mother."

Mrs. Weasley opened her mouth to tell her son off when the queue moved forward, bringing them straight into Lockhart's line of vision. He glanced up. And saw Harry, who just at that moment was idly scratching his forehead, scar fully visible.

Lockhart shot to his feet. "It can't be Harry Potter!" he cried in delight. Harry immediately cringed and tried to hide behind Mrs. Weasley. Too late. Lockhart had already dived in to the crowd and was dragging Harry forward. Luella noticed Harry's face burning red as he stared firmly at the ground while Lockhart flung his arm around him, posing for the *Daily Prophet* photographer who was even now taking pictures of them. Poor thing, Luella thought. All of a sudden, she felt extremely glad her own destiny was the closely guarded secret it was.

"Rather him than me." Luella heard Deanna murmuring quietly. "Poor sod." Next to her, Rianne nodded in agreement.

"I'd hate that." Marlie however, looked less sorry.

"The lucky thing!" she whispered. "The lucky, lucky thing! Oh, what I wouldn't give!"

Lockhart motioned for quiet. "Ladies and gentlemen! What an extraordinary moment this is! The perfect moment for me to make a little announcement I've been sitting on for some time! When young Harry here stepped into Flourish and Blotts today, he only wanted to buy my autobiography - which I shall be happy to present him now, free of charge - he had no *idea* that he would shortly be getting much, much more than my book *Magical Me*. He and his school fellows will in fact be getting the real magical me! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure and pride in announcing

that, this September, I will be taking up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!"

The crowd cheered wildly as Harry found himself being presented with the entire works of Gilderoy Lockhart.

"Sweet Mother Demeter, you *are* joking, aren't you?" Luella heard Deanna say quietly.

"This'll be a fun year." Rianne said sarcastically. "Medea's ringlets, Tyler, you'd better get your mother's entire library sent up to school if he's going to be teaching us."

"What's up with you two?" Marlie snapped. "I'm sure he'll be a fine teacher! I mean, his books are so cool and well-written, how can we not learn anything from him?"

Rianne laughed derisively. "I doubt that. From what I can see, he appears to be all words and no action. Full of false joviality and camaraderie that vanishes as soon as you actually need him for anything. Much like my father really. I bet Lockhart was a Gryffindor too."

"Gryffindors do not act all friendly and bugger off when the chips are down!" Ron yelled.

"I never said you all did." Rianne said patiently. "But my father is the type to do that and he was a Gryffindor. And Lockhart strikes me as the same type of person. That's all, Weasley!"

Ron was not convinced but did not press the point. Deanna glanced over towards Harry and immediately took Luella's arm.

"What is it?" Luella asked in surprise. Deanna's face had set in the firm expression that usually indicated trouble.

"There." she said grimly. Luella looked. Harry was giving his Lockhart books to a trembling Ginny. However, that wasn't what had attracted Deanna's attention. Making his way towards Harry was a blond boy they recognised all too well from school. Draco Malfoy.

"All right then." Luella heard herself saying. "Twin Avengers in to action." Diving smoothly through the crowds, she made her way over, Deanna hard on her heels.

Ron and Hermione had also noticed and had fought their way over. Luella arrived just in time to hear Ron saying "Bet you're surprised to see Harry here, eh?"

"Not as surprised as I am to see you in a shop, Weasley." Draco drawled. "I suppose your parents will go hungry for a month to pay for that lot."

Ron dropped his Lockhart books into Ginny's cauldron and went for Malfoy, prevented only by Harry and Hermione grabbing his jacket in a manoeuvre Luella recognised all too well from having to stop Deanna doing much the same thing.

Deanna stepped in. "What's this I see?" she raised an eyebrow. "Draco Malfoy in a shop? What happened, Malfoy? Servants on strike were they?"

Draco sneered back at her. "At least my family have servants, Tyler. At least I have a family."

Deanna glared at him, but did not retaliate. Calming down, she grinned evilly and stepped forward, their noses almost meeting.

"My ancestors could beat yours in a fight any day, Malfoy. I didn't get my name because they paved roofs for a living." She smiled sweetly. "Tal-y-Rhys, Malfoy. Remember that name. Your father will explain its significance, I'm sure." She backed away again. "Now leave Harry Potter alone."

Draco looked shaken, but the scowl did not leave his face. "Don't threaten me Tyler. Your ancestors aren't here now, are they?"

"No. But I am." Luella said quietly. She gestured in front of his face. "Leave now." she said, eyes boring in to his. "Leave and don't threaten us again!"

Draco's eyes widened in fear and he took a few steps backwards, trembling. He would have turned and run altogether had another wizard not arrived, placing a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Luella recognised him immediately. She'd never met him before, but the resemblance to Draco said it all. Lucius Malfoy. He didn't say anything, just let his cold grey eyes travel over them. They stopped to linger on her, and his sneer deepened. Luella didn't know exactly what he was thinking, but she suspected the words "Mudblood" and "disgrace to Slytherin" figured strongly in there somewhere. She just hoped he didn't recognise Glamoury when he saw it used, or questions would surely be asked about why a common Muggle-born had a gift found only in pureblood families.

Mr. Weasley, followed by the twins, Rianne and Marlie had by this time fought his way over.

"Ron, what are you doing? It's mad in here, let's go outside once you've got your books..." His voice trailed off as he saw Lucius Malfoy. Mr. Malfoy sneered at him.

"Well, well, well. Arthur Weasley."

"Lucius." Mr. Weasley said coldly.

"Busy time at the Ministry, I hear. All those raids - I hope they're paying you overtime." Mr. Malfoy sneered unpleasantly. He reached into Ginny's cauldron and came up with a battered Transfiguration textbook. "Obviously not. What's the use of being a disgrace to the name of wizard if they don't even pay you well for it?"

Mr. Weasley had gone a far darker shade of red than any of his children had. Luella felt a tug on her arm. Deanna was trying to drag her away.

"Better watch it, Lu, I think there's a fight brewing here. Best place for us is out of it." Luella did as her friend said and moved away.

"We have a very different idea of what disgraces the name of wizard, Malfoy." Mr. Weasley said threateningly.

"Clearly." said Mr. Malfoy, eyes passing coolly over Luella and the Grangers, who were standing behind her, watching apprehensively. "The company you keep, Weasley... and I thought your family could sink no lower-"

Mr. Weasley's self-control deserted him, as he launched himself at Mr. Malfoy, sending him backwards into a bookshelf. Books went flying everywhere as the two men grappled with each other.

"Get him Dad!" the twins were yelling. Marlie was also getting quite enthusiastic, cheering on Mr. Weasley for all she was worth. Mrs. Weasley, by contrast, looked quite horrified, screaming at her husband to leave him. As were the shop assistants, all trying to separate them without actually intervening too closely.

Then another voice cut through the melee. "Break it up there, gents, break it up." A flash of magic lit the shop up as someone fired a charm into the air, causing everyone to fall silent. Hagrid pushed his way through the crowd and pulled the two wizards apart. And right behind him was a blonde witch who Deanna and Luella had no trouble recognising.

"Mum!" gasped Deanna. "What are you doing here?"

Caitlin Tyler surveyed the chaos, her eyes blazing. "I came to see how you and Luella were getting on. Got rather bored at home, to tell you the truth." She turned to Arthur Weasley, who was nursing a cut lip. "Arthur, what on earth do you think you're doing? Starting a fight in the middle of Flourish and Blotts, in front of your own children, not to mention mine, what on earth possessed you?" She noticed Lucius Malfoy getting to his feet. "Oh. I see. As you were then, Arthur."

"Well, well, well." Mr. Malfoy said mockingly. "Caitlin Tyler, no less. We meet again. Come now, why look at me like that? You weren't nearly so unfriendly last time we met."

Luella guessed instantly what Mr. Malfoy was referring to - Caitlin Tyler's abduction and torture by Death Eaters way back in the Voldemort Years. Caitlin fingered her wand furiously, but did not lose her temper.

"Why, Lucius." she said casually. "What could you possibly be referring to there? Care to divulge the details? If it's privacy you're after, there's some lovely little maximum security cells back at the DDAE. I'm sure we could arrange for one if there's something you were going to tell me."

Mr. Malfoy didn't answer her, just glared. Instead, he turned on Ginny Weasley, thrusting her Transfiguration book back in to her hands.

"Here, girl - take your book - it's the best your father can give you." He wormed his way out of Hagrid's grip, took Draco by the hand and swept out of the shop. Hagrid and Caitlin turned back to Mr. Weasley.

"Are you all right, Arthur?" Caitlin asked him. Mr. Weasley nodded.

"I'll be fine. Oh, that Lucius Malfoy, I would dearly like to see him get what's coming to him one of these days..."

"As would I, Arthur." Caitlin said darkly. "As would I."

Mrs. Weasley was near hysterics. "Arthur, what on earth were you thinking of, brawling in public like that? What must everyone think of us, Gilderoy Lockhart must think we're the worst kind of family, and in front of your own children too! Caitlin's got every right to arrest you now for breaching the peace like that, and I wouldn't be at all surprised!"

Caitlin raised an eyebrow. "For landing a punch on Lucius Malfoy, I'd be more inclined to give him a medal. Relax, Molly, I've no intention of arresting your husband. I can't say I would have done any differently."

Hagrid straightened Mr. Weasley's robes. "Yeh should've ignored 'im, Arthur. Yeh know what he's like, they're all rotten ter the core, that family. Yeh didn't see Caitlin 'ere reaching for 'er wand and that's some achievement on 'er part, I can tell yeh."

Caitlin grinned. Her somewhat volatile temper was considered legendary by all who knew her. "Hagrid, it was a very close run thing!" she smiled. She surveyed the shop lazily. "I suppose we'd better clear this place up before Belladonna Flourish comes out here demanding to know what we've done to her shop. *Restoratio!*" She cast charms at the fallen bookshelves, causing them to right themselves, and the books to fly back on to the shelves. The crowd fell back in silence, no one daring to get in the way of the infamous Caitlin Tyler. With the mess eventually cleared up, and the Grangers, Weasleys, Harry and Hagrid leaving the store, saying their goodbyes to Caitlin and the four girls, Caitlin turned to her daughter and her friends.

"So what on earth was that all about, then?" she asked, good-naturedly.

"Draco was picking on Harry." Deanna said simply. "So we stepped in. Then Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Weasley stepped in, and Mr. Malfoy taunted Mr. Weasley into hitting him."

"Why am I not surprised?" Caitlin sighed. She suddenly noticed a *Daily Prophet* reporter hovering nearby with a notepad and quill, clearly dying to ask her some questions. "Do you want something, sir?" she asked coldly.

"Er... I was just wondering how you were feeling about having to break up a fight in the middle of Flourish and Blotts and what your opinion on Mr. Malfoy is..." His voice trailed off under the look Caitlin was giving him.

"Go away, you annoying little man." she said softly. She intensified her gaze. "Go away and forget that little fight ever happened." she said soothingly. "Just forget you ever saw it. If anyone mentions it again, you won't know what they're talking about. You certainly won't remember that I or my daughter were ever here."

The reporter went into a trance and turned, walking away. As he crossed the room, he shook himself and headed for Lockhart, looking bemused. Lockhart lost no time in flagging down the reporter. "I say, old chap, any chance of working that little confrontation into the story somehow? 'Beautiful Auror heroically breaks up fight between two old rivals' sort of thing?"

The reporter looked at Lockhart as if he'd gone mad. "You what, squire?" Lockhart blinked, shrugged, and turned towards Caitlin, grinning from ear to ear. Caitlin noticed him coming in her direction and groaned under her breath.

"Caitlin Tyler!" Lockhart grinned, striding over to her and putting his arm round her, blissfully unaware of Caitlin's smile going rigid and her eyes silently commanding him to drop dead on the spot.

"Gilderoy." she said through gritted teeth.

Lockhart grinned delightedly and kissed her on the cheek, much to Deanna's horror. Caitlin's eyes widened in shock before narrowing to a look any normal man would have run from in fear of his life.

"Still as pretty as ever!" Lockhart laughed. "Well, fancy seeing you here. Here for the book signing, were you?"

"No." Caitlin said shortly. "I was looking for my daughter."

Lockhart started, before turning to the four girls. He immediately singled out a horrified Deanna. "And what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asked her in saccharine tones.

"Considerably richer than you." Deanna said stonily. Lockhart just laughed and squeezed her cheek.

"She's as witty as her mother and no mistake." he smiled indulgently. "So, still fighting the Dark Forces then?"

"I'm still at the DDAE." Caitlin said coldly.

"Excellent, excellent. You know, if you ever need a hand bringing those villains to justice, just give me a call. I'm always available if you need any assistance. In fact, if you're a little short staffed, I've got a few weeks free, I'm quite willing to step in and give you all a hand..."

"NO!" Caitlin shouted. She swiftly recovered herself. "I mean, no thank you, Gilderoy, we're quite all right at the moment, thank you for the offer."

"Well, if you're sure. I had better let you ladies get back to your shopping then." Lockhart grinned, his teeth gleaming. "No doubt you're all looking for the latest fashions and make-up, so I shall let you all continue in your quest for beauty, not that any of you need it." he flashed them all another grin, which only Marlie returned. Bidding farewell to Caitlin, he sauntered off. Caitlin breathed a sigh of relief as he left.

"Dear gods, the two most annoying people on the planet and I have the misfortune to run into both of them on the same day!" she sighed. "And most amazing of all, no one's been injured yet. I must be losing my touch."

"Did you know him, then?" Deanna asked curiously. Caitlin nodded.

"Two years above me at school. Friends with your father, Rianne. A Gryffindor."

"I thought so!" Rianne laughed. "They just seem to have the same inability to read anyone else's body language, and don't really know when to stop."

"Rianne, I think you've just summed him up nicely." Caitlin laughed. "He worked at the DDAE briefly too. He was the most incompetent Auror I've ever seen, what on earth Barty was thinking of, hiring him, I don't know. We were desperate for recruits, that's the only reason I can think of. In the end, we managed to convince him that he was needed far more desperately by these peasants in Bulgaria whose village was being terrorised by a vampire, and we never saw him again. For which we were all truly thankful."

"He's going to be our new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher." Luella said.

"He's WHAT? You're *joking!*" Caitlin gasped. She clutched her head in her hands, almost pulling her hair out. "Oh my word, Mel is going to go ballistic when she hears this! You mean the next generation of Aurors is going to be taught by him?" She turned on her heels, and took Deanna and Luella by the hand, heading for the Anti-Dark Arts section of the shop. "Right, you four. Come with me. I'm personally buying you some proper Defence Against the Dark Arts textbooks. I'm not having your education suffer because of him."

As she began going through Flourish and Blott's shelves, flinging textbooks into a basket held by a highly unwilling Deanna, Caitlin could only wonder what on earth Dumbledore was thinking of, hiring the man. Lockhart had been a fool at Hogwarts, and didn't appear to have changed. However, another thought swiftly occurred to her, which caused a sly grin to spread across her features. If Lockhart was going to be working at Hogwarts, that meant he'd be a colleague of Severus Snape's. Severus Snape, whose temper was even more unstable than hers, and who was far more easily irritated. While she did not suffer fools gladly, Severus Snape did not suffer them at all. Making a mental note to ask Deanna to keep her updated on the situation, she began to cheer up immensely. This year looked like it was going to be fun...

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Chapter Two A Result Least Expected

The Hogwarts Express blew its whistle, causing Luella to start.

"I really wish it wouldn't do that so suddenly!" she complained to Deanna.

"Wuss." Deanna said casually. "Here, give me a hand with this trunk, with all those extra books Mum's making me take, it's going to need two of us to stabilise it." Luella sighed, produced her wand and gave Deanna a hand getting her trunk into the luggage rack.

Marlie eyed the precariously balanced trunks carefully. "Are you sure that rack's strong enough to hold four heavier than usual trunks?"

"It'll hold." Rianne said calmly. "Come on, Marls, this is the Hogwarts Express we're talking about here, not British Rail you know!" Rianne had had her first journey on a Muggle train that summer and had not been impressed ("you mean we have to share a carriage with everyone else on the train? And look at the colour scheme, it's hideous").

Marlie continued to look at the trunks dubiously. "Well, if you say so. But I'm not happy about this."

The door to their compartment opened, and Hermione poked her head into the room.

"Hello, you lot." she said, trying to sound cheerful, but without success.

"Hi Hermie." Deanna grinned. She glanced into the corridor and raised an eyebrow. "Potter and Weasley not around?"

"That's just it." Hermione said nervously. "The Weasleys haven't turned up yet and I'm worried. I mean, it's nearly eleven, the train'll be leaving soon, what if they miss it?"

"We get a peaceful year?" Marlie said hopefully.

"The Gryffindor Quidditch team falls apart with three key members missing and we get to erase the still painful memories of last year?" Rianne said.

Marlie winced. Luella felt for her. Marlie had been Slytherin Seeker last year, but owing to Gryffindor narrowly beating Slytherin in the House Cup, had lost her place on the team. While Marlie had taken the news far better than Luella would have in the same position, that didn't mean she liked to discuss or be reminded of the fact.

"I'm sure they'll turn up, Herm." Luella said quietly. "Mrs. Weasley's not the type to let them hang around. They'll be here."

"I hope you're right." Hermione said timidly. Luella gave her a hug. Harry and Ron were Hermione's two best friends, and without them Hermione was in for a lonely time.

"Hey. They'll make it. It'll be OK. We'll look after you, won't we?"

"Eh? What?" said Deanna absently.

"Yeah, whatever." Marlie said vaguely.

"Absolutely, Lu." Rianne said, her attention on her Potions textbook. Luella sighed.

"Well, you've still got me, mate. You can join us until they turn up if you want."

"Thanks. I'd like that." Hermione smiled.

Deanna sat up, her attention caught by something on the platform outside. Turning to Marlie, she gave her a nudge.

"Wake up, Lovegood. I think your lover boy Freddie's turned up."

Marlie straightened up immediately. "Tyler, shut up. Where is he?" she asked, gazing out of the window.

Her question was soon answered as Mr. and Mrs. Weasley's voices were heard, telling their children to behave at school, look after their younger siblings, and other things of that nature. Luella noticed Percy, the oldest Weasley, get on board, followed by the twins. Marlie got up and went out to greet them. Luella and Hermione looked at each other, smiled with relief and went to see where Harry and Ron were.

"Hi boys!" Marlie fluttered her eyelashes at them.

"Hey, Lovegood." Fred grinned back. "Did you miss us?"

"Miss you?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Fred, I was round your house only the other week. I've not had time to miss you!"

"Oh, so you would have done if you'd had the chance?" laughed George. Marlie scowled at him.

"Where's Harry got to, then?" Luella asked. "I don't see him or Ron anywhere."

Fred turned around. Sure enough, his parents were even now seeing Ginny on to the train, but of Harry and Ron, there was no sign.

"That's strange." he said, frowning. "They were right behind us. And the train's about to leave, they can't be hanging around the platform still. Hey, Mum, where's Ron and Harry?"

Mrs. Weasley looked up from saying goodbye to her daughter. "Aren't they with you?" she said, surprised. She looked hastily up and down the platform. No Ron. No Harry.

"Ron? Harry?" she called out. No reply. "Boys, this isn't funny! Boys? Where are you?" She sounded increasingly desperate. Mr. Weasley tried to comfort her.

"Maybe they just got held up, Molly. You know what boys are like, always dawdling."

"Arthur, the train is about to leave, if they miss it, gods know how they're going to get to school!" Mrs. Weasley was beside herself. "This is no time for pranks!"

Ginny's lower lip began to tremble. She looked almost as distraught as her mother. "They'll get in trouble, won't they? They'll get expelled, won't they?"

Hermione gave the girl a hug. "Ssh, it's all right, Ginny. I'm sure people miss the Hogwarts Express every year and don't get expelled for it." She looked at Mrs. Weasley. "Do you want us to come and look for them?"

"No time." Mr. Weasley said. "The train really is about to leave, we can't have you lot being late and all. We'll sort it out, don't you worry."

"Fred, George, you look after your sister, do you hear me?" Mrs. Weasley said. The twins nodded. Mr. Weasley closed the train door and followed his wife off to search for the boys.

In the distance, a whistle blew. Slowly but surely, the train began to pull out of the station. Luella exchanged a concerned look with Hermione. The Hogwarts Express was underway and Harry and Ron weren't on it. This was not good news.

Ginny began to cry. "They've missed the train, they've missed the train!" she wept. "They'll get expelled, they'll never be able to get jobs, and it's all my fault! If only I hadn't gone back for my diary, we'd've been on time!"

Hermione gave Ginny a hug. "Ssh, Ginny, it's OK. It's not your fault. The rest of your family made it, didn't they? Not your fault those two couldn't turn up on time if they had a Time Turner to help them."

Luella knelt next to them both. "I'm sure they'll be fine, Ginny. Your mum and dad'll get them to school somehow. You'll see." Ginny dried her eyes, nodding mutely, but did not look happy.

Marlie spoke up. "Hey, Ginny. Ever played Jenga?"

"Jenga?" Ginny asked, confused.

"Yeah, it's a Muggle game. Deanna's got a set with her. It's really easy, I'll teach you how to play if you like." Marlie smiled warmly.

Ginny nodded. "OK."

Marlie smiled. "Cool. Lu, Herm, fancy joining us?"

"Yeah, go on then. Hermi?"

Hermione assented.

"Boys? You up for it?" Marlie grinned.

"Nah, we'll leave you to it." said Fred.

"Yeah, we're off to catch up with Lee, see what he's managed to bring to school this year."

"If it comes anywhere near me, it's dead." Marlie told them as they left.

Ginny's spirits improved as the journey progressed, to the extent that certain Slytherins were beginning to wish she'd stayed miserable.

"Marlie, why'd you invite her along?" Deanna murmured in Marlie's ear.

"Felt sorry for her." Marlie muttered back.

"Not one of your finest ideas, was it?"

Ginny, to her surprise, had proved to be quite good at Jenga and was now consistently winning.

"I like this game!" she said, bouncing up and down. "I'm going to ask Mum and Dad to get me one for Christmas. We can play with it in the common room, it'll be great!"

"Any idea what house you'll be in yet?" Luella asked. She was beginning to warm to the youngest Weasley.

Ginny shrugged. "Not really thought about it much. I suppose I'll be in Gryffindor, all my brothers were, and Mum and Dad too. What house are you in, Luella? Are you a Gryffindor too?"

Luella, not yet in her school uniform, coughed rather nervously. "Slytherin." she said hastily.

Ginny's eyes widened. "Slytherin?" She looked rather shocked and backed away. Luella hung her head. Evidently Ginny shared her brothers' prejudice.

"Yes, Slytherin." she said, a little harshly. "Got a problem?"

"No." Ginny said, her voice trembling. "It's just that..." She frowned, looking a little confused.

"What is it, Ginny?" Hermione asked gently.

"Well, didn't you and Harry say that Luella helped you defeat You-Know-Who last year?" Ginny said, puzzled.

"That's right." Hermione nodded.

"But... how could she have done if she's in Slytherin? I mean, don't they all support You-Know-Who?"

The room fell silent. Rianne put down her Potions textbook. Marlie put her customised Nintendo Game Boy to one side. Deanna stopped idly strumming her guitar and looked up. As one, all three girls gave Ginny the feared Slytherin Look. Hermione buried her face in her hands, clearly mortified. Luella sighed. This was going to be interesting.

"Ginny," Deanna said, just a little too calmly for Luella's liking, "let me give you a little survival tip. When you're in a room full of Slytherins, it is not generally considered a good idea to stand up and say things like 'All Slytherins are Death Eaters'. Is it, folks?"

"Right up there with walking through rural Alabama with a gay rights t-shirt on." said Marlie.

"Or walking into an Orthodox Jewish household on Yom Kippur and saying 'Who's for a bacon sandwich then?'" commented Rianne.

"You're all Slytherins?" Ginny gasped, moving nearer to Hermione for reassurance.

"Yes dear, we are." Rianne said acidly.

Ginny looked wildly at Hermione. "Help!" she whispered. Hermione gave her a cuddle. "Don't be scared, Ginny, they're not into Dark Arts, any of them. You know Marlie, don't you? And I can promise you, Lu's perfectly nice."

Luella gave Ginny a smile. "It's OK. Despite what you've heard, we're not all Dark mages. I mean, look at Deanna and Marlie, their mothers work at the DDAE, and they were Slytherins."

Ginny seemed to regain her confidence. "What about Rianne's mum?"

The temperature dropped once more. Deanna just buried her head in her hands, Marlie shot a nervous glance at Rianne while Luella just sighed. Rianne had a very firm McGonagall look on her face.

"She's dead. Died when I was a kid." she said coldly. Ginny blushed.

"Sorry." she said timidly. "I didn't know."

"Looks like she takes after her brothers all right." Deanna said. "That typical Gryffindor tact's coming right over."

"Deanna!" Luella snapped. "She didn't know."

"No, suppose not. Sorry, Ginny."

"Well, it'll save the Sorting Hat a job at any rate." sighed Marlie. "Ginny, have no fear. You'll be a Gryffindor."

Ginny mumbled something. Luella decided to change the subject, but didn't get the chance. The door opened. All six of them turned to see who it was. And four of them immediately reached for their wands.

Draco grinned cockily as he sauntered in. "Well, hello, the Mudblood and Muggle lovers Convention has reconvened for another year, I see." He looked around.

"Where's Potter and Weasel? Planning their engagement party or something?"

"They got held up. Missed the train." Deanna said coldly. "Malfoy, is there something you wanted to tell us? Because you're in my light."

Draco actually looked a little disappointed. "You what? Missed the train?"

"That's right. They didn't make it onto the platform in time and it went without them." Rianne said. "Oh." Draco said, crestfallen. "So neither of them are on the Hogwarts Express at all?"

"No, Malfoy, they are not." Marlie said. "Like Rianne and DT just told you. Clean your ears out, boy, I've seen Hufflepuffs take things in better."

Draco ignored the insult, looking rather put out. "Oh. Never mind. Guess I'll see you all at school then." He turned and left.

Rianne rubbed her eyes and looked at Marlie. "What's up with him? He had the four of us here, a Muggle-born Gryffindor and a Weasley and didn't pick a fight! Is he well?"

"Well thank the gods you noticed that too." Marlie said in confusion. "Otherwise I'd've thought I'd gone mad."

"What's wrong with him?" Deanna demanded, insulted. "Are we not worth fighting anymore?" She got up, walked to the compartment door, and yelled into the corridor, "Oi, Malfoy! Get back here and fight like a man, ya coward! I demand you pick a fight with us!"

"Is it me, or did he seem rather disappointed that the Boy Who Lived hadn't made it?" said Luella thoughtfully.

Both Deanna and Marlie started to grin. "Malfoy fancies Potter, Malfoy fancies Potter!" Marlie giggled.

"Blackmail!!" Deanna laughed. "Now, what can we get him to do in return for us not telling his father that?"

"Anything you want, I should imagine." observed Rianne.

"Harry's not involved with him, is he?" Ginny quavered.

Luella laughed. "Of course not! They hate each other. However, they do say that love and hate are very closely related, and it's starting to look like Draco Malfoy might be having tendencies towards the former."

"Well, I hope you're not really going to blackmail him." said Hermione. "I know he's Malfoy and everything, but you could get in real trouble for that!"

"Ooh, yeah, that's a point. We could lose points for that, a lot of points." Rianne said, worried. "Can't afford a repeat of last year!"

"No, we can't. Hey, thanks for that, Hermi, you've just saved us from throwing the Cup away!" Deanna grinned. Hermione groaned, wishing she'd kept quiet.

Ginny was openmouthed. "You actually plan how you're going to win the Cup?"

"Oh yes." Rianne said casually. "We're Slytherins, this is what we do."

"See, we're united by our ambition. And our main ambition is to win. To be the best, at everything." Marlie said. "Which is why we go to the lengths we do, and why we won both Cups seven years in a row, until last year, which I'd really rather not talk about."

"Oh." Ginny said. She frowned. "It all sounds like hard work to me. I mean, I wouldn't mind winning the Cup, but I couldn't be bothered calculating what'll win and lose points like you lot."

"Which is why you're going to be a Gryffindor." said Rianne. She glanced out of the window. "I suppose we'd better get changed into our uniforms - I recognise those mountains. We'll be there soon."

The other girls nodded, and started retrieving their Hogwarts robes.

The four Slytherins and Hermione disembarked from the coach that had dropped them off outside Hogwarts.

"Nice to be back, isn't it?" Deanna sighed, stretching her legs.

Hermione looked troubled. "I wish Harry and Ron were here." she whispered.

"They'll make it." Luella said gently, patting Hermione on the shoulder. "Somehow. If Ron's got any of his brothers' ingenuity, they'll find a way."

"Hope Ginny's OK." Marlie said, watching the boats that carried the new first years glide across the lake.

"You're being rather charitable towards her, aren't you?" Deanna asked in surprise. Marlie shrugged.

"She's a good kid. Sweet little thing. And Ron's her favourite brother. I just hope she's not too worried about him. I mean, coming to Hogwarts for the first time is scary enough as it is."

They were distracted by a shape coming out of the sky. Luella turned and saw a peregrine falcon swoop down majestically, coming to land on Deanna's outstretched arm.

"Nestra!" Deanna grinned. "Good Nestra. Hey girl, what've you got for me, eh?"

Nestra dropped a rolled up paper into Deanna's waiting hand, which turned out to be the evening edition Daily Prophet.

"Ooh, news, what's happening out there?" Rianne asked, curious. Deanna allowed Nestra to hop on to her shoulder and read. She raised an eyebrow in amusement.

"I'm telling you, folks, this paper gets more trashy every time I read it. The Weekly World News has got more sensible stories than this thing sometimes. Look at this. 'Flying Car Mystifies Muggles'. I mean!"

A horrible thought struck Luella. "Wait a second. What sort of car?"

Deanna scanned the article. "Turquoise Ford Anglia, according to one eyewitness. Why?"

"A turquoise Anglia?" Marlie said sharply. "The Weasleys have got one of them."

"And it can fly..." Rianne said, the same thought that had occurred to Luella occurring to her.

"You don't think...?" Deanna asked.

"Harry and Ron?" gasped Hermione. "Oh no, they're going to be in so much trouble for this!"

"In trouble for what, Miss Granger?" a cold, cruel voice came from behind them. All five turned round. Behind them stood the Head of Slytherin House, Professor Severus Snape.

They all looked frantically at each other. Yes, the Slytherins were his favourite students and usually quite adept at dealing with him, but not this time. While they

were good at getting themselves out of trouble with Snape, getting Harry and Ron out of trouble was something else entirely.

"Uncharacteristically quiet, aren't we?" he said, slightly menacingly. "You surprise me, you four always have plenty to say for yourselves while you, Miss Granger, never normally resist a chance to show off your knowledge. So enlighten me. What have Potter and Weasley done now?"

"We don't know, we've not seen them." Rianne said, truthfully enough. Well, it was true, they didn't know for sure.

Snape fixed Hermione with his most dangerous look. "Normally right by your side, are they not? Why not today? Miss Granger, please explain to me exactly what is going on or I will start deducting points from Gryffindor for every second you waste. I'm waiting."

Hermione stared miserably at the Slytherins, her eyes begging for help. Luella could take it no longer.

"They missed the train, sir. Hermione was worried they'd get in trouble for being late." she said quietly. It was true in part, anyhow. However, Snape did not look convinced.

"If that is so, then why are you all huddled round Miss Tyler's newspaper as if it's just announced the return of Lord Voldemort?" Snape seemed almost amused as both Rianne and Hermione flinched at his use of the name. Reaching out, he plucked the newspaper from Deanna's hands and read the front page. Enlightenment seemed to dawn on him. All five girls stared at the ground, their hearts sinking.

"I see." he said quietly. "All right. Get to the feast, we may as well have some students make it on time. Five points from Gryffindor for wasting my time, Miss Granger." He turned on his heel and left, taking the newspaper with him.

"Do I get my paper back at any point?" Deanna demanded. Hermione was close to tears.

"They'll get expelled for sure!" she sobbed. "He's always looking for an excuse to pick on them, and now he's got the perfect reason to get rid of them!"

"They won't get expelled. Will they?" Marlie asked anxiously.

"Not by Snape." Rianne said casually. "They're Gryffindors, he can't expel them. That's Dumbledore and McGonagall's decision. Ah well. No use worrying about it now. Let's get inside."

They had not long settled down at the Slytherin table when their fears were confirmed. The chatter and babbling of three hundred students was immediately brought to a

hush by a deafening crash from outside. Silence followed, then came the unmistakable sound of the Whomping Willow thrashing around.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Marlie asked wearily.

"Depends." said Rianne. "If you're thinking, do you have a hope in hell of seducing Hagrid, then no. However, if you're thinking, could that be our dear Gryffindor friends Potter and Weasley making an entrance, then yes, I am."

"Looks like they did take the car then." Deanna murmured. "Although I think their landing technique could use a little work."

Professor Dumbledore called for silence. Calling a smirking Professor Snape over, he said a few words to him. The Potions Master lost no time, turning swiftly away and stalking out, presumably to investigate. Dumbledore made no other response, merely announcing that seeing as everyone was ready, they might as well proceed immediately with the Sorting.

The lights dimmed. Soon, all was darkness, apart from candles glimmering on the tables. Slowly, majestically, the great doors at the main entrance swung open, and Professor McGonagall led the first years in.

Luella sought out Ginny, pale and frightened in her uniform, which made her look even shorter than she already was. Marlie was also watching Ginny closely, looking rather concerned. Despite her frequent bickering with the Weasley twins, she was really quite good friends with them, and that liking had clearly extended itself to their little sister.

The Sorting Ceremony began. Luella allowed most of it to pass over her, clapping politely when one of them became a Slytherin. She clapped that bit harder when the names Montague, Autumn, clearly the younger sister of Summer and Winter Montague, and Vettinari, Lydia, evidently part of the same family that had spawned Lucas and Laetitia, were sorted into Slytherin.

And then, finally, the last first years were Sorted, and it was Ginny Weasley's turn.

Ginny had spent most of the Ceremony in a daze. Everyone else appeared to have already formed little cliques, and she had been feeling a little left out.

Before they'd been led into the Great Hall, she'd found herself in conversation with two other girls, one dark-haired, green eyed, olive-skinned girl with a decidedly aristocratic air, and the other fair-skinned with light-brown hair and hazel eyes. They'd introduced themselves as Lydia Vettinari and Autumn Montague.

"Autumn?" Ginny had asked in surprise. "That's an unusual name."

"My mum's idea." Autumn had explained. "We're all named after the seasons in our family. My older sibs are called Summer and Winter. Summer's a Gemini, Winter a Sag, I'm a Libra, hence the names."

"The Montagues always were a bit funny like that." Lydia drawled. "My family prefer to stay true to our Roman roots." She looked Ginny over, with the air of someone well used to assessing a person's social status. "So what family do you come from then? I assume your family are one of us." Ginny suddenly felt very conscious of wearing second-hand, ill-fitting robes.

"One of us?" Ginny said, confused. "I don't think we're related to the Vetinaris. And I don't know what house your family are in."

"Well, of course not." said Lydia patiently. "But they are mages, aren't they?"

"Well, yes." Ginny said. "Does it matter?"

"Not as much as it used to." the other girl sighed.

"Nothing wrong with a bit of Muggle blood." Autumn said. "My father reckons a bit of hybrid vigour strengthens the magic. Bit like with horses. Breeding in a few Muggle horses or mongrels, can produce better specimens. My parents run a stable for magical horses, you know."

"A few, Autumn, not the whole damn family tree. So you are a pure-blood then." Lydia said, turning back to Ginny.

"I think so." Ginny said uneasily. Autumn didn't seem too bad, but Lydia was giving her the creeps.

"What's your name?" Autumn asked.

"Ginny. Ginny Weasley."

Both girls turned to each other, nodding knowingly.

"Say no more." Lydia laughed. "We've heard of that family." She gave Ginny a pitying look, letting her eyes drift over Ginny's robes. "Obvious really, the robes should have told me if the hair didn't."

"Oh, Lydia, leave her." said Autumn. "She'll be a Gryffindor, they all are. Looks like it'll be just you and me in the Slyths then, the other girls don't look up to much."

"Looks like it." Lydia had sighed as she'd followed her friend away. "This is going to be a pretty boring year if it's just us in a dorm. Still, my brother reckons that sharing a common room with Marlie Lovegood and Deanna Tyler's never dull, even if they are both Muggle lovers."

Ginny had watched them go, clenching her fists in helpless anger. She'd never really been looked down on before, quite the reverse. As the youngest, and the only girl, she'd been bought things and given privileges that her brothers had missed out on. She'd never had to share a room, had rarely had to wear hand-me-downs and had been spoilt rotten by her entire family. It was quite a shock to see someone like Lydia Vetinari giving her snide looks. Shock, however, turned quite swiftly into rage. How

dare she? How dare she look down on her like that? Just because we don't have much money, and we're Gryffindors, she thought, furious. Well, I'll show her. I'll show her that I'm worth a bit of respect. I'll show all of them!

It was in this frame of mind that she'd sleepwalked through the ceremony, coming up with imaginative fantasies of getting her own back and proving to the world that just because her family was poor didn't mean that she wasn't important. Only the sound of her own name being called out brought her back to reality.

"Weasley, Virginia!" Ginny nearly jumped out of her skin. She wasn't used to being called by her full name. And she certainly didn't feel ready for the Sorting. No help for it now though. Shaking, she walked to the stool and sat down. One last glance at her brothers on the Gryffindor table, all watching her intently, George giving her a wink and Fred mouthing "Go, sis!" No Ron though. Her heart sank. She really wished he'd been here; he might be her big brother but that didn't mean they didn't get on. Sighing, she pulled on the Hat.

Immediately, a sense of peace came over her, as if the rest of the world had disappeared and it was just her and the Hat. So it was that she got the shock of her life when she heard a voice speaking to her.

"Hmm, interesting. Very interesting. Loyal, patient, quite hardworking. Hufflepuff might suit you, yes indeed. But you're also a tough young lady, aren't you? Quite the fiery one, but brave too. So perhaps Gryffindor for you."

My brothers are all Gryffindors, she thought idly.

"Maybe. But it's you I'm concerned about now. And you are not your brothers. In fact, I get the feeling you're quite the little star at home, or at least, you'd like to be. Quite a few big dreams you have there, and the talent to achieve them too."

Really? Ginny thought.

"Yes, really. So where shall I put you?"

Ginny couldn't answer for a moment, she was too overwhelmed by the idea of being able to take on the world to respond. I could do it! she thought. Really achieve something, never have to wear second-hand clothes again, show that Lydia Vettinari what a Weasley's capable of!

She addressed the Hat again. All right. Put me where I can make my dreams come true. Put me in whatever house is best for someone who wants to make something of their life. Where I can make the most of my talents and be appreciated.

"So that's your wish, is it? Well, in that case, there's really only one option. The House of the Ambitious it is! SLYTHERIN!"

What?? Ginny thought, incredulously, ripping the Hat off her head. Slytherin? I can't be, I just can't. She looked at her sash and hat-band in disbelief. Green and silver. Oh gods...

Panicking, she stared pleadingly at her brothers, desperate for reassurance. There was none there. Fred and George looked too stunned to give any support, while Percy looked simply furious. The enormity of it hit her. She was a Slytherin. The lone Slytherin in a family of Gryffindors. Already, Percy was turning against her. Fred and George would probably follow when the shock wore off. Her parents' reactions, she didn't want to think about. And as for Ron... Dear Gaia, he's going to hate me, she thought, horrified. Of all the family, Ron was the most vocal about how horrible Slytherins were. And now his little sister was one. At least you weren't here to see it, Ron, she thought, head bowed in misery as she made her way slowly to the Slytherin table.

The Slytherin table appeared almost as stunned as the Gryffindor one. While some younger Slytherins were clapping, most were turning to their friends whispering "A Weasley? Here?"

Deanna blinked rapidly. "Ginny? Slytherin? Did I hear that right?"

"Well, she's heading this way and she's got green and silver tied round her waist." Rianne observed. "I'd say that's a pretty good sign, wouldn't you?"

"She doesn't look too happy." Luella said, worried. "Poor thing, her family aren't going to be pleased with her."

"You're right." said Marlie. "They're really not going to like this." She reached out as Ginny approached like one in a trance, taking the stricken girl by the hand and guiding her into the space next to her. "Hey, Gin." she said, smiling warmly in an attempt to comfort her.

Ginny slid listlessly onto the bench. Slowly, she raised her eyes to Marlie's. Luella flinched from the look there, one of sheer, abject hopelessness.

"I'm a Slytherin." she whispered.

"Yes, you certainly are." Marlie said, placing an arm tenderly around her.

"How?" Ginny whispered, rubbing her eyes. "How can I be Slytherin? My family are all Gryffindors, why aren't I one? How the hell did I end up here?"

"That's what we'd all like to know." said Rianne.

"The Sorting Hat's buggered, it must be." said Deanna. "We'll have a word with Professor Snape, get him to have you re-Sorted."

"Tyler, the Sorting Hat does not do cock-ups." Rianne snapped. "Well, Gin, looks like you're here for the duration. Welcome to les Verts-et-Argents."

Ginny buried her head in Marlie's flowing locks and began to cry. Marlie comforted her as best she could, glaring at Rianne.

"Have a bit of sensitivity, Stormer! The poor girl's about to be disowned by half her family, show some sympathy! Look, don't cry, Ginny love. It'll be all right. The Hat wouldn't have put you here if you didn't belong here. They'll understand in time. You'll see."

Ginny looked up, wiping the tears away.

"I can't possibly belong here, can I? I mean, I'm not devious, I'm not manipulative or cunning or ruthless or sarcastic or anything like that. I'm hopeless of thinking up put-downs and one-liners and I can't do threats to save my life."

"She's got a point." Deanna said. "Marls, she has no Slyth qualities whatsoever."

"Tyler, be quiet!" Marlie snapped. "You're not helping. Well, you must have some, Gin. What did you say to the Hat to get put here?"

"I told it I wanted to go somewhere I could make the most of my talents and get some respect. Told it I was tired of being looked down on and taken for granted. I wanted..." she gulped, choking on her tears. "I wanted some power."

Marlie sighed wearily, exchanging looks with her friends, all three of whom were beginning to understand. "Well, you're in the right place for that, Ginny love. Look, don't worry about it. I'm sure your parents and brothers will come round. In the meantime, you just keep that lust for power in your mind. Pretty soon, you'll be wondering why you ever wanted to be a Gryffindor."

"I doubt it." whispered Ginny. "I doubt it."

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Chapter Three Gryffindor No More

That night in the Serpent's Nest, all of the dorms were alive with gossip about their unexpected new arrival, but two more so than most.

Marlie was pacing the floor in the fourth year dorm, too keyed up to go to bed even if she'd wanted to.

"Marls, go to bed." yawned Deanna. "You'll wear the floor out, pacing like that."

"You expect me to sleep after an evening like this!" snapped Marlie. "When the younger sister of friends of mine is facing the biggest crisis of her life?"

"Not like you to get so worked up over something like this, Marlie." Rianne observed. "She's only a firstie, and not even related to you either. Surely you don't need to bother about her?"

"Yes I bloody well do!" Marlie exploded. "If I don't, who else will? Her only childhood playmates were her older brothers. Her Gryffindor older brothers. The entire set up of that family is based on all the kids ending up in Gryffindor. They're not going to want anything to do with her now, are they? And even if they did, there's precious little they can do if she's in a different house. Ginny has no one, Ri, no one! If I don't take care of her, no one will. Do you honestly think I'm leaving an innocent young Gryffindor raised child like her to fend for herself in a house like this! I mean, look at her." She gestured helplessly. "No guile, no cunning, no wits about her whatsoever. She's not going to last two minutes on her own."

"Especially not if she's going to come out with classics like 'Don't all Slytherins support Voldemort?'" Deanna laughed.

Luella met Marlie's eyes. "Bloody hell, Marls, she hasn't got a hope, has she?"

"I wouldn't say that." Marlie said, her eyes taking on a reflective look that clearly meant she was planning something. "She's here, after all. She does have ambitions, she does want power. She has... potential. I just need to help her develop it."

"Will you do it in time, though?" Rianne asked.

"In time for what?" asked Marlie.

"Before she goes under." Rianne explained. "We've got to help her settle in and put some roots down, and soon. She'll need to make friendships, or at least establish non-hostile relations with the other girls in her dorm, make some friends close to her in age, learn how to protect herself from those who would take advantage, and generally assert herself as a force to be reckoned with. All this needs to be done soon. We can't protect her forever, after all."

Marlie looked thoughtful. "Who is she in a dorm with?"

"Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague." Deanna said promptly.

"Lucas and Winters' kid sisters." said Luella. "What are they like, does anyone know?"

"Autumn's nice enough." Marlie said. "I gather she has a tendency to follow Lydia around though."

"What's Lydia like?" asked Deanna.

"Not so good." Rianne told her. "Bit of a brat, and rather taken with herself. Spoilt rotten. Her pure-blood status has gone to her head a bit."

"Damn." Marlie punched her hand in frustration. "Likely to pick on a Weasley then? Well, we'll have to see what we can do. Ri, can you get Lucas to have a word with her? Warn her that it might not be prudent to make an enemy of her, get her to help her settle in, that sort of thing. Let it be known that I'm keeping an eye on her. I may not be Seeker any more, but I'm still Keeper of the Sound System and that has to count for something."

"Will do. I'll get Kat to have a word with Summer too - if Autumn can be persuaded to stand up to Lydia, she and Ginny might get on quite well. OK, that's her potential friends sorted out. What about her enemies? In particular, Malfoy."

They all looked at each other. How to persuade Draco Malfoy to leave Ginny alone?

"Marlie, you're his cousin. And he does hate you the least." said Luella. "Anything you can do?"

Marlie laughed. "Lu, the only language that boy understands is force, although he's also quite fluent in bribery, blackmail and corruption. And we've got no inducements strong enough to stop him picking on his arch-rival's younger sister."

"Just leaves force and intimidation then." said Deanna. "Leave it to me. First time he tries anything, he'll have me to deal with."

Rianne nodded sagely. "Excellent. Just leaves Snape."

The others all stared at her. "Snape??"

"I really am going mad!" exclaimed Marlie. "Rianne Stormosi saying something bad about Professor Snape? What is the world coming to?"

"Let's hear your reasoning then, Stormer." Deanna grinned. "I want to hear why you've gone off him."

"He may be our house head, he may be fond of us, he might treat us well, but I'm not blind." Rianne said, gazing into the fire. "I've seen how he treats the other students. I've seen how he treats Gryffindors. I've seen how he treats the Weasley boys."

"Ginny's a Slytherin, though." Luella said.

"If she's just a Slyth like everyone else, then why are we having a crisis meeting about her when we could all be sleeping?" Rianne asked, sarcasm tingeing her every word.

"He won't look at her and see Slytherin, he'll look at her and see Weasley, which in his mind equals Gryffindor. The fact that she's in his house won't make any difference, in fact, it might annoy him more. We need someone who he likes, someone who he'll listen to, someone whose opinion he respects, to have a quiet word with him and persuade him to go easy on her. Volunteers, anyone?"

As one, they all looked at Deanna. "Hey, wait a second, you lot stop looking at me like that!" she said.

"Why not?" asked Rianne. "He likes you. I bet he'd give Harry Potter fifty points and a Prefect badge if you asked him."

"Hell, he'd probably give Neville Longbottom fifty points if *you* asked him, Tyler." Marlie smiled sweetly. "Go on DT, you know you want to."

Deanna looked helplessly at Luella. "Lu, help!"

"Don't look at me. You were saying over the summer about how maybe Snape wasn't so bad as he seemed. See this as an opportunity to get on his good side. Besides, Ri and Marlie are right. He does have a soft spot for you."

"All right." Deanna sighed. "I'll talk to him. I don't guarantee anything though. Now what?"

"We just need some one on one mentoring for Ginny. She's going to need a little tuition on how to be a Slyth." Rianne said thoughtfully. She turned to Luella. "Lu, any chance of a little Glamoury here and there? Make Ginny look a bit more powerful and intimidating."

"No." said Luella firmly. "First of all, Ginny needs to learn how to make people respect her for what she is, not because of some magical power not her own. Secondly, who do you think I am, the Lady of the Lake? I'm not all-powerful, Ri. Glamoury's primarily concerned with influencing how other people feel about me. I don't think I can make the whole of Slytherin House think Ginny's a demi-goddess. I can make them feel that way about me, and I can give individuals very precise instructions on how to act, but not the whole house. The more people I'm trying to influence, the less precise the results are. That's very advanced stuff you're talking about there, it'd take a lot of power. Caitlin reckons I should pace myself, start off small."

"Caitlin, eh?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "When did you get on first-name terms with her, you're normally so respectful."

"She said I could. She's been teaching me about Glamoury over the summer. Felt that if we were going to be working together, I might as well use her first name when my parents weren't around. But getting back to Ginny. No, Glamoury is out of the question. But I'm willing to befriend the kid. Wouldn't be the first time I've had to help out friendless little first years after all." Luella smiled, thinking of Hermione, who had also needed a bit of mentoring before she could really settle in.

"Me too." chipped in Marlie. "After all, she knows me already, and she'll need to learn some proper Slytherin qualities too. No offence Lu, but manipulation's not really your strong point."

"Now, now, Marls, I hope you're not going to turn her into a conniving fiend." said Deanna amiably.

"Deanna, you wound me! I'm very hurt by the insinuation that I'd corrupt her."

"Not denying it though, are you?" Deanna responded tartly.

Marlie smiled. "I am only going to bring out and enhance what is there, DT. No more."

"Well, we'll trust you. Lu, keep her in line, won't you?"

"I'll do my best. Right, with all that sorted, let's get some sleep. Because I'm knackered."

Had Ginny been aware of all the planning going into her education as a Slytherin, she would no doubt have been amazed at all the effort involved, not to mention greatly reassured that someone was looking out for her. However, right now, she had never felt so miserable.

Lydia and Autumn were regarding her with looks of amazement, Lydia combining it with an amused grin.

"Well, well, well. A Weasley in Slytherin. This is a surprise. Sorting Hat having an off-day, was it?"

Ginny glared at her. "No. I asked to be here. Sort of."

"Sort of?" Lydia asked derisively. "Did you want to be here or not?"

"Well, no." admitted Ginny. "I told it I wanted to succeed and be special. And it said I belonged here."

Lydia and Autumn exchanged knowing looks. "Well, it's good to know that there's at least one member of your family who doesn't subscribe to the poor but happy worldview."

"Lydia!" said Autumn. "Ignore her, Ginny, she's a complete snob. Anyhow, welcome to Slytherin. It's not as bad as it's made out. Really! My sibs reckon it's by far the best house to be in. We have the best parties. And a sound system, whatever that is. And the coolest decorations, thanks to Marlie Lovegood."

"Marlie did the decorations?" Ginny asked. She recalled Fred and George joking about Marlie's taste, or lack of it. "Oh gods, the common room's not all pink and fluffy, is it? I didn't really see it properly earlier."

"Apparently there's some kind of lamp with a naturally glowing crystal that has a pink and fluffy shade." said Autumn.

"And a globe covered in little mirrors that hangs from the ceiling and rotates." added Lydia.

"Then, right, there's these really weird elongated egg shaped things with these coloured globules in them which float around. Winter reckons they're called magma lights, or something."

"Lava lamps." said Lydia. "Then there's the extra chairs that the woman's installed. Some of them look like these weird coloured bubbles shaped like chairs. While others are made of cloth and stuffed with beans and don't even look like chairs at all, just round shapeless lumps. Lucas reckons they're quite comfy, although useless for studying in."

Ginny felt her mind boggle. She could hardly wait to see what the common room looked like.

"What else has she done to it?" Ginny asked, her misery beginning to abate a little. Slytherin was beginning to sound like a fun place to be.

"Not sure, but I think leopardskin might be involved." said Autumn.

"Erm... lovely." said Ginny, trying not to imagine.

"See? You've mastered sarcasm already." said Lydia approvingly. "We'll have a Slytherin out of you yet. Stick with us, girlie, you could learn a lot. You know, when I first saw you, I wasn't sure about you, but now I get to know you, I'm changing my mind."

"Really?" asked Ginny, still a little wary of her.

"Oh yes." Lydia said airily. "You looked a bit weak, and just a little too wholesome for your own good. Appearances can be so deceiving, can't they?" She flashed Ginny a smile, which Ginny was not entirely convinced by.

"So I'm not weak or wholesome then?"

"Not if the Sorting Hat put you here." said Autumn. "I mean, assuming it was working all right, which I'm sure it was, if it thought you belonged here then you must have

some Slytherin qualities. Which means you're not weak or wholesome. Although it did put Luella Martin here so..."

"Luella Martin who singlehandedly fought off You-Know-Who?" said Lydia sarcastically. "Luella Martin who can make even Draco Malfoy walk in fear of her if she puts her mind to it? Luella Martin who hangs around with Deanna Tyler? That Luella Martin? Autumn, open your eyes. She is no weakling if all I've heard is true. She's a Slytherin. There are no weak Slytherins. She might be a Mudblood, but she's one I don't want to get on the wrong side of."

Ginny gasped. "You can't use that word! It's really insulting."

"I'd never use it to her face." said Lydia carelessly. "Anyway, she might be a Muggle-born, but at least she's one of our Muggle-borns. You're right, it's not really done to call a fellow Slythie Mudblood. The others though, are fair game..."

"But it's not very nice." said Ginny, having doubts about this take on life.

Both Autumn and Lydia laughed at this. "Nice?" laughed Autumn. "Ginny, Slytherins do not do nice. We do pragmatic. We do better than everyone else. We do not, repeat, NOT do nice."

"Ginny, dear," said Lydia. "you're a Slytherin. That simple fact will mark you out. Everyone else is going to envy you, hate you, call you names, call you Death Eater. Why do they do this?"

"I don't know." said Ginny, deciding that replying "Because it's true?" was not a good ploy.

"Because they're jealous!" Lydia explained. "We are better than everyone else in this school. We are the ones with the talent, the drive, the will to achieve, and we get the top rewards. There's a reason why most of the privileged, wealthy pure-blood families end up here, you know! Because we want to be successful more than any other house. Trust me, Ginny, you want to be the best, this is the place to come. You want to succeed?"

"Yes. Yes I do." said Ginny.

"You want to have the world at your feet?"

"Yes." said Ginny, beginning to feel that desire for glory coming back.

"You want to be more than just average?"

"Absolutely." said Ginny, her unhappiness fading away. "I hate being poor. Being poor sucks! And I really hate people looking down on our family because of it!" She felt her anger flare up again, along with a vision of Lucius Malfoy insulting her father. Never again, she thought. I will make my fortune, or die trying. No one will ever look down on the Weasleys again.

"I'm going to be rich." Ginny said suddenly. "I'm going to make my fortune. I'm going to be richer than the Malfoys! And the whole country's going to know my name! I swear it!"

Autumn and Lydia gave each other a high-five. "She's one of us!" squealed Autumn. "Oh marvellous day!"

"It's so satisfying to see someone finally deciding they're not going to put up with obscurity any more." agreed Lydia. "I don't know how you could bear it for so long, my dear. Well, remember us when you're famous, won't you?"

"Course she will." snapped Autumn. "We'll be loaded ourselves by then. Come on, let's go to bed. Night, Ginny. See you in the morning."

"See you." Ginny yawned, pulling the curtains shut and settling into bed, still buzzing with excitement. Her misgivings were giving way to a sense of anticipation. Lydia and Autumn didn't seem too bad - at least, they seemed to like her now. And it was starting to sound like Slytherin was the fun place to be. She knew what a sound system was from listening to Marlie, and she knew that the Gryffindor common room definitely didn't have one. Plus she could feel her dreams edging that bit closer to reality. She'd often heard her parents say disapprovingly "Those Slytherins don't know what failure is, most of them. They could do with a few more setbacks, they could." Up until now, she'd agreed. Not any more. A whole house full of people who couldn't conceive of not doing well out of life! How could she not succeed surrounded by that sort of mentality? Turning over, she went to sleep, dreaming of riches, fame and generally being adored.

The following morning, however, it was not Ginny, but another Weasley that commanded Marlie and Luella's attention. Luella, desperate to find out if Harry and Ron were OK or not, decided to wait in the Entrance Hall for the two boys. Marlie, out of sheer curiosity and an unconfessed fondness for the various Weasleys, was also hovering around.

Luella felt her heart leap as Harry and Ron sauntered downstairs, apparently none the worse for wear. Hermione was walking ahead, evidently not talking to them. Waving to Luella, she walked on into the Great Hall. Luella waved back before turning her attention to Harry.

"Harry, my god, are you all right?" she said, concerned. "We heard you got caught flying Ron's dad's car. What happened? Are you expelled?"

Harry shook his head. "No, we survived, although I was worried. Snape caught us and he was not happy."

Marlie grinned. "What did he do to you?"

"Nothing much." Harry said. "He was really sarcastic at us though."

Both girls winced. Snape being sarcastic was not a fate they'd wish on anyone.

"So what punishment did you get?" Luella asked.

"Well, he went and got McGonagall and Dumbledore. We got detention, missed the feast, and got made to feel really bad about it all." Harry told her.

"Did you lose any points?" Marlie asked hopefully.

"No, we managed to talk McGonagall out of it. Seeing as term hadn't started yet."

"Oh." Marlie said, disappointed. "Never mind. Next time perhaps."

"Marlie!" Luella snapped. "Sorry about her, Harry. She's obsessed with the points tally already."

"Trying to make up for last year, eh?" Ron grinned.

Marlie scowled at him. "Shut up Weasley."

Ron sniggered. "Sorry Lovegood. You lot got a new Seeker yet?"

"No." muttered Marlie darkly.

"Any idea who it'll be?" Harry asked, curious.

"No." Marlie said. "Our reserves really aren't up to first team Quidditch, any of them, and there's no one else I know who fancies their chances."

"There is." Luella sighed. "I think Malfoy would quite like a go. Heard him bragging to Crabbe and Goyle how now the way was open, maybe he was in with a chance. Reckons he'd love the chance to go up against you one on one, Harry. Marlie, stop sniggering!"

"Sorry." grinned Marlie. "Just the idea of Draco wanting to go one on one with Harry. Now there's an image."

Luella groaned. "Marlie, you disgust me sometimes. Great, now I'm going to have this image of Draco thrusting Harry up against the locker room wall and trying to ravish him in my head all day long. Cheers, Lovegood!"

Marlie looked hurt. "Lu, you say that like it's a bad thing."

Ron and Harry looked revolted. "Lovegood, shut up!" Ron yelled. "I did not need that! Oh god..."

"See, now look what you've started." said Luella. "Nice one, Marls. Can someone change the subject please?"

Something seemed to occur to Ron. "Hey, there was something I meant to ask you. Ginny. What house did she end up in? McGonagall didn't say, we didn't really spend much time in the common room last night, and when we asked Seamus, Dean and

Neville, they all went rather sheepish and wouldn't say anything. Hermione won't talk to us over the car incident, and I've not seen any of my brothers yet. You lot were there, where'd she end up?"

Luella and Marlie looked frantically at each other. "Are you going to tell him?" Marlie asked.

"You're a friend of the family, you tell him!"

"I know, but you're so much better at doing this sort of thing." Marlie smiled her most charming smile. Luella sighed and turned to Ron.

"Ron, there's not really an easy way to tell you this, but here goes. You see, Ginny didn't get put in Gryffindor."

"Oh." said Ron, dejected. "Oh well. Never mind, not the end of the world. Where did she end up? Hufflepuff, I suppose."

"Um, not quite." Marlie said hesitantly. "Ron, she ended up in..."

She never got the chance to finish the sentence. Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of the one person they least wanted to see.

"Well, well, well." Draco drawled as he sauntered into view, Crabbe and Goyle close behind. "Hello, Weasley. What a fine morning this is! How are your new Gryffindors? Our new Slytherins certainly meet our expectations. Although one of them we certainly didn't expect to acquire." He grinned malevolently. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle began sniggering.

"Malfoy, go away." snarled Marlie, going crimson.

"Oh, don't be like that, cousin! You were certainly giving a hearty welcome to our new arrival at the feast, weren't you? Don't you want to join in the celebrations then?"

"Malfoy, drop it." Luella said softly. "Drop it now, before I make you."

Draco regarded her coolly, although Luella was pleased to notice his usual contempt was missing. "You don't scare me, Martin." he said quietly, before turning back to Ron, studiously avoiding her gaze. Luella felt a rush of fear go up her spine. He can't possibly know! And yet someone's told him that hiding your eyes can help you resist Glamoury...

Ron looked at Malfoy, hostility tempered with confusion. "What are you talking about, Malfoy?"

"Yeah, Malfoy, spit it out. We don't have time for your games." said Harry.

"The celebration to welcome our most promising new recruit, of course." drawled Draco. "I must say, Weasley, my opinion of your family's gone up a few notches now."

Congratulations, we didn't think you had it in you. Who would have thought such an unremarkable family tree could have produced such a promising bloom?"

"What are you talking about, Malfoy?" said Ron, baffled.

"Shut up, Malfoy!" yelled Marlie.

"Don't you know?" Draco asked innocently. "Did your brothers not feel brave enough to tell you the good news?"

"Malfoy, I'm warning you." said Luella, through gritted teeth. "One more word..."

"What good news? What don't I know? I've hardly seen my brothers since I got here. WILL SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?" yelled Ron in frustration.

"Why, Ron, I'm talking about your lovely younger sister of course."

Ron went pale, before a look of fury crossed his freckled features. "What the hell do you know about my sister, Malfoy." he hissed dangerously.

"More than your family, evidently." Draco smiled, his teeth flashing in the sunlight like a shark's. "Congratulations, Weasley. You've a Slytherin in the family."

Marlie clapped her hands to her face. Luella felt her heart sink as the news fully penetrated Ron's consciousness.

"My sister... a Slytherin?" he said faintly. He shook himself, the shock wearing off. "You lying bastard, Malfoy! My sister is not a Slytherin, never will be a Slytherin, absolutely, definitely CANNOT BE SLYTHERIN!!" He lunged for Malfoy in rage. As one, Harry and Marlie leapt to restrain him.

"Leave him, Ron!" Harry gasped. "Don't let him get to you, you know what he's like." He turned to Luella. "Lu, he is lying, right?" He took in the look of shame on Luella's face. "Lu? Oh good god, please don't tell me..."

Ron, still struggling in Marlie and Harry's arms, looked at the door leading up from the dungeons. And instantly fell still, his mouth hanging open. Harry and Marlie released him and turned to look themselves.

Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague had just walked in, chatting brightly to another girl in between them, telling her about the Slytherin Quidditch team, who was on it, and how they were going to win the Cup this year. Even at a distance, there was no mistaking that red hair. Ginny.

She looked up, her eyes immediately falling on her brother. Lydia and Autumn noticed her stop, turned to look, and stopped talking.

For a moment, no one moved or spoke. Brother and sister just looked at each other in silence. Ron was first to respond. Brushing Harry and Marlie away, he strode over to

his sister. Trembling, Ginny hid her eyes, cowering in fear and shame. Ron gazed at her green and silver house colours, unable to speak. At length, he finally found his voice.

"No." he said quietly. "No way. This isn't happening, it can't be true, it just can't. Ginny, tell me, tell me it's a joke. Please." His eyes stared desperately at her, pleading with her to deny it, to lie to him if she had to, anything other than admit the truth.

Ginny finally raised her eyes to his, tears glistening on her cheek. "Ron." she choked. "Ron, I'm so, so sorry. Ron, please." She reached out to him. Ron stared in horror, before stepping swiftly out of reach.

"Don't touch me. Don't come near me." he whispered. Blood rushed to his cheeks as the rage came back. "Slytherin... Ginny, how could you? How *could* you?" he screamed at her.

"Ron, please!" Ginny begged, crying in earnest now. "I didn't ask to be Slytherin, I swear. You've got to believe me!"

"Believe you?" said Ron. "Believe a Slytherin? You have got to be kidding, your lot wouldn't know the truth if it waltzed up to them wearing pink pyjamas with leopardskin trim while doing the Lambada." He gave her a look of pure disgust. "My family gave you nothing but love all the time you were growing up. You had everything we could afford, any treats that were going, we let you have them because we wanted you to have the best. We cared for you, played with you, shared our secrets with you, loved you! And how do you repay us? You go over to them. All this time we thought you were our sweet little sister, our Gryffindor little sister, and it turns out you were nothing but a lying little Slytherin all along! Did you enjoy it, huh? Did you? Did you enjoy seeing us fall over ourselves to make you happy, lapping up the attention, all the while looking forward to the day you could join your real house and leave us behind? Did you?" yelled Ron at a terrified Ginny.

"No!" sobbed Ginny. "No, I didn't, I swear, I had no idea I'd be a Slytherin, I promise. I'm sorry, Ron, I'm so sorry, please don't hate me!"

"Hate you?" Ron gave her his most disgusted look. "Ginny, you're not worth hating. You mean nothing to me, nothing. Less than nothing. As of now, you are no longer my sister. In fact, I don't have a sister."

"Ron..." whispered Ginny. He didn't respond, just turned away and walked furiously into the Great Hall. Draco, his task accomplished, gave Ginny his widest shark's grin and followed him, Crabbe and Goyle with him.

Marlie walked straight over to Ginny and pulled her into a hug, blonde hair falling all over the crying girl. "Hush, Gin, it's all right. Don't cry. It's OK. He'll come round. He just needs to get used to the idea."

Ginny didn't answer, just burying her face in Marlie's hair and crying all the more as Marlie tried to console her.

Luella turned to Harry. "You'd better go after Ron, he's going to need all the support he can get. See if you can calm him down, talk him round." Harry nodded and followed Ron into the Great Hall.

Lydia and Autumn had remained silent throughout the entire exchange. They were now tentatively approaching Ginny, trying to speak but unsure what to say.

Marlie saved them the bother by speaking first. Looking up, she fixed them with her most intense expression.

"You are Lydia Vetinari and Autumn Montague, yes?"

They nodded.

"Ginny's dorm mates."

Again the nodding.

"Then listen to me. Ron is perhaps the most volatile member of her family. But what he says out loud, to her face, the rest of them will be thinking in silence, at some level. In a very real sense, Slytherin House is the only family she has left now. And as her dorm mates, you two are her closest relatives."

"And?" Lydia asked.

"And that means that the responsibility lies with you two, doesn't it?" Marlie said, her soft tones doing nothing to mask the fierceness. "I want you to look after her, hang around with her, help her settle in, OK? Because she is going to need friends. Good friends. Friends she can rely on. I'll do what I can, but I can't be there for her all the time. She is going to need you. Have you got that?"

Both girls nodded.

"Good." said Marlie, releasing Ginny. "In that case, it's time we had breakfast. Come on, Lu." With that, she led all five of them into the Great Hall.

Chapter Four The Debt of Fifteen Years Ago

Deanna and Rianne were going over their new timetables over breakfast. They looked up as Luella and Marlie joined them.

"Well?" asked Deanna gently. "What happened?"

"Ron found out." said Marlie wearily. "Bloody Malfoy turned up and told him. Then Ginny chose exactly the wrong moment to make an entrance."

Deanna and Rianne both winced.

"Is Ginny OK?" Rianne asked.

Luella looked down the table to where Lydia and Autumn were trying to comfort the youngest Weasley. "Not too good, but I think she'll recover. She's gone from crying her eyes out to sniffling, so that's an improvement."

"What about Ron?" asked Deanna.

"Being an idiot, as expected." sighed Marlie. "Publicly disowned her, won't even acknowledge her existence. Bloody hell, anyone would think she'd run off with Snape or something."

"What the hell is wrong with being a Slytherin anyway?" grumbled Rianne. "We're nice people most of the time!"

"Leave him." said Deanna wearily. "You know what Ron's like, always making snap judgements about people based on nothing more than his own petty prejudices."

"Terrible thing, that." said Marlie, beginning to grin. "Taking instant irrational dislikes to people for no reason at all. Good thing we're not like that, eh Ri?"

"Of course not, Marls." grinned Rianne. "That description doesn't fit anyone we know at all, does it?"

"All right, all right, point taken." said Deanna irritably. "Can I interest you lot in your new timetables? Snapey just brought them round."

Silence fell as Luella and Marlie reached for their timetables and studied them. Marlie gave a little squeal of delight.

"Ooh, we've got Defence Against the Dark Arts first thing!"

Deanna, normally one to be pleased by this piece of information, just rolled her eyes. "Hmm. Marlie, with Gilderoy Lockhart teaching it, it may not live up to your expectations."

Marlie looked indignant. "There is nothing wrong with Gilderoy Lockhart! Just because your mother's taken against him for some petty reason of her own."

"She has not taken against him for some petty reason of her own, she has taken against him because he's an incompetent and patronising moron." said Deanna patiently. "Lu, Ri, back me up here."

"She's right." Rianne said coolly. "If he's ever taken on a werewolf in his life, I'll eat Barney."

Marlie sniffed. "Huh. Well, I think he's wonderful."

Deanna groaned. "Oh dear gods, Marlie, you do not fancy Lockhart, surely?" Marlie didn't answer, blushing and squirming. Deanna held her head in her hands.

"My life, this is going to be a fun year, isn't it? Marlie fancying Lockhart, Rianne lusting after Snape."

"I do not fancy Professor Snape!" Rianne snapped. Deanna ignored her.

"Just leaves Luella." Deanna said, engaged in full rant mode. "Why don't you develop a crush on Hagrid, Lu, make it a hat-trick?"

Luella laughed. "I don't think so, Dee. Can't stand men with beards."

Deanna sighed with relief. "Well, at least one of my friends has some sense. Seeing as we're on the topic of Snapey anyway, when is Potions?"

Rianne scanned her timetable. "Last lesson today."

"Cool." Deanna said. "It'll be nice to get back in to things again."

All three of them turned to stare at her in shock. Rianne scratched her ear.

"My hearing must be going. I thought for a minute that I heard Tyler say she was looking forward to Potions."

"You heard it too!" Marlie exclaimed. "Thank the gods for that, I thought I'd suddenly Apparated into the Twilight Zone or something."

"I didn't know you liked Potions, Deanna." Luella grinned. "In fact, I seem to remember you saying it wasn't proper magic."

Deanna shrugged, slightly embarrassed. "Well, you know. It's not so bad. Quite interesting when you get into it. And fun too - you never have to worry about anyone's work blowing up the classroom in Flitwick's lesson."

Marlie and Rianne were staring at her, unable to believe what they were hearing.

"Deanna, you mean to tell me you actually like Potions?" Rianne stared in disbelief. Deanna didn't answer.

"Bloody hell, Tyler, you'll be telling us next that Professor Snape's not such a bad bloke after all, and that he's quite nice when you get to know him." commented Marlie.

"Well, he is." muttered Deanna. "He's always been pretty good to me."

Marlie shot to her feet, drawing her wand. "All right! Out with it!" she demanded.
"What have you done with the real Deanna Tyler??"

Luella decided to save her friend from potential embarrassment. After all, Deanna's new found warmth towards Snape and the reasoning behind it was far too personal to be shared.

"Marlie, relax." Luella laughed. "Can't you tell? The answer's perched on her shoulder. She's so easily bribed, is our Tyler." She indicated Nestra, who was preening herself.

Marlie sat down again. "That's all right then. You had me worried for a minute there, DT. Thought you might be going soft on us."

Deanna laughed. "No danger of that! Just that Snapey's not so bad, really. I really should make a bit more of an effort at that subject, it could come in useful one day." Not to mention making Snape proud of me, she added mentally, glancing hopefully at her Potions master. He was calmly eating his breakfast, gazing into space. His eyes travelled aimlessly along the Slytherin table, until they came to rest on her. For a moment, their eyes met. Snape's normal scowl melted into a genuine smile. Deanna found herself grinning in return, as a rush of emotion took over. Her conversation with Luella back in August came to mind again. Why couldn't it have been you, she thought fiercely. Why couldn't you and Mum have fallen in love and got married? It would have been cool, growing up with you as a father. I don't think I ever would have worried about having to fend for myself if you'd been there. I don't think I would have been afraid of anything with you there.

Deanna turned away and rubbed her eyes, blinking back the urge to cry. Stop that, she told herself. Marlie's right, you are getting soft. Avoiding looking at Snape, she turned her attention determinedly to her breakfast.

By the time breakfast had finished, Ginny had recovered enough to go to classes. This was a good thing, not least because her first lesson was Potions. Ginny recalled Ron, Fred and George talking about Snape, saying how he was easily the most feared and hated teacher in the school, and shivered. This man was now her House Head? She just hoped it was true what Ron said about him favouring Slytherins.

"So what's Professor Snape like?" she asked Autumn.

"A sarcastic bastard, to quote my brother." grinned Autumn. "But he's all right really. You just have to watch your step and not get on the wrong side of him."

"He always favours us anyway." said Lydia. "Don't worry, Gin. You'll be fine. Remember, you're a Slyth. He won't pick on you. If he does, get your friend Marlie Lovegood to have a word with Deanna Tyler. Apparently he favours her and Lu Martin even more than most of us."

"Does he?" Ginny asked, beginning to cheer up.

"Oh yes." Lydia nodded. "No one's really sure why though. The most popular theory is that he's trying to get under her mother's cloak."

Ginny shrieked with laughter. "He's not!"

"He is!" grinned Autumn.

"Now that's never been proven." said Lydia. "But she's his age, single, attractive, charming, rich and able to kill you before she's even stopped talking to you. Can't blame him for fancying her, can you?"

"Well, no, but..." Ginny thought back over everything she'd ever heard about Caitlin Tyler. While there was no doubt that Caitlin Tyler was very attractive, she was also, in Ginny's mind, absolutely terrifying. Her parents had always spoken about her in hushed, pitying tones, as if something was wrong with her, as if she was some kind of invalid. There was that story of Deanna's, about how she'd taken her six year old daughter round the worst bits of Knockturn Alley to frighten her off wanting anything to do with the place. And when she'd seen her in action, breaking up the fight between Lucius Malfoy and her father, she'd seemed like some cold avenging angel. Yes, she was pretty, but there was a harsh expression on her face and in her eyes that made her look older than she actually was. She couldn't imagine anyone loving her, although you had to respect her.

Autumn nudged her in the side. "Quiet, both of you. Here he comes!"

Professor Snape strode down the corridor, his usual bored and cynical mask in place. Barely looking at them, he opened the door and walked in. The class filed in, no one saying a word.

Ginny, Lydia and Autumn settled themselves at the back of the class, in the same seats that, unknown to them, Fred, George and Marlie inhabited during their Potions classes. Ginny looked at him for the first time. So that was Professor Snape. Ron had been right - he didn't look friendly. Stern and forbidding, with black eyes that looked as if they could penetrate right to your very soul, Professor Snape exuded an air of cold aggression that stopped any potential trouble in its tracks. Ginny decided that it would definitely not be a good idea to get up to any mischief in his lessons.

He began by taking the register, starting with the Ravenclaw students, before moving on to the Slytherins. All proceeded normally at first, with Snape making the odd comment along the lines of "Another Montague, I see." or "I remember your cousin, let's hope you do as well as he did." Snape read out Lydia's name, commenting on her older siblings, before moving on to the last name on the register.

"Miss Virginia Weasley - what?" His eyes shot open as he looked at the register again. Ginny remembered that he'd not been present at the Sorting and presumably had not noticed her at breakfast. He mustn't have been told the news yet.

"A Weasley? In Slytherin?" he asked in wonder. Ginny stifled the urge to giggle.

"Here, sir." she said in what she hoped was a combination of matter-of-fact nonchalance and proper respect for a teacher. Snape looked her straight in the eyes, alive with curiosity, and clearly dying to ask all sorts of questions. However, he restrained himself, and merely gave her the same knowing look that Lydia had given her the night before.

"Now that's something I didn't expect." he said, amused. "You are the younger sister of Percy, Frederick, George and Ronald, are you not?"

"Yes, sir." Ginny said calmly. This was rather easy, she reflected. Hiding your emotions and maintaining an unruffled exterior really wasn't as difficult as she'd thought.

"Daughter of Arthur and Molly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, well, well. Wonders will never cease. Welcome to Slytherin, Miss Weasley. May you achieve your ambitions. It will be... interesting... having you as a member. Yes, very interesting indeed." he mused, almost to himself. He seemed to shake off the thought, and turned his attention back to teaching.

"Well, someone's made quite an impression, haven't they?" teased Lydia as the lesson got underway. However, her tone of voice was not an unkind one.

"Stop it." said Ginny. "It's not my fault I got Sorted into the opposite house everyone expected. I can't help it if I stand out from the crowd." She shook her head in her best prima donna impersonation.

Lydia and Autumn looked impressed. "By Hera, I think she's got it." said Lydia.

"You're right, Lydia, she's got the Slytherin arrogance mastered already. Gin, you're a marvel."

"A true Slytherin. Slytherin Ginny." said Lydia, playing with words. "Ginny the Slyth. All Hail Ginny, the Weasley of Slytherin!"

"Ginny the Slytherin Weasley." said Ginny, half to herself. "I like that!" She looked around the classroom, starting to smile. She could get to like it here, she decided. Yes, she could definitely get to like being Slytherin.

As Ginny was getting to grips with the rudiments of Potions, the Slytherin fourth years were all gathered outside the classroom that had once been Professor Quirrell's and was now Gilderoy Lockhart's, waiting for Defence Against the Dark Arts to start. And the main, indeed the only, topic of conversation was Lockhart.

"What do you reckon he'll be like?" Alex Lynch asked curiously.

"Don't know." Chris Bryant said. "But he sounds brilliant! I mean, all the things he's done, taking on banshees, werewolves, vampires, all sorts! It'll be so cool hearing about all that."

"I doubt it." Lucas Vetinari and Rianne both said at the same time. They looked at each other, raised eyebrows and grinned. "You first." Rianne said. Lucas laughed.

"OK then. All very well Lockhart having done all that, but it's all a bit Mitchie Miggs, isn't it? All rather Action Wizard. I mean, really, how often in our lives are we going to be facing a pack of werewolves armed with nothing but a shoelace and a twig?"

"Never, werewolves are solitary animals." Deanna responded.

"Exactly. My father reckons it's a good read, but rather impractical. What do you think, Rianne?"

"My father thinks he's wonderful, which just goes to show." Rianne commented dryly. "Typical Gryffindors. I got to meet Lockhart over the holidays and I can't say I was impressed. Rather full of himself, and completely clueless to anyone else's feelings. His only redeeming feature was that it wasn't deliberate."

Winter Montague snorted. "So he's stupid rather than deliberately irritating. Hate to tell you this, Stormer, but that's not a good thing."

"Oh, leave him alone!" snapped Marlie. "I'm sure he'll be an excellent teacher. He must know heaps!"

"Yeah?" Chris asked. "So what does your mum think of him then?" Marlie blushed and shuffled uncomfortably.

"She hit the roof when I told her he was going to be teaching us." she muttered. "Had to go and have a lie down. Then rushed off to work, claiming she had to chair an emergency crisis meeting and send an owl or two."

The other Slytherins laughed. Lucas turned to Deanna. "Well, that makes two top Aurors against. What about the other best known one? What does the notorious Caitlin Tyler make of it all? After all, her career's been as action-packed as his."

"Put it this way." Deanna said delicately. "When she heard the news, she immediately bought the four of us the entire contents of Flourish and Blott's Anti-Dark arts section, and is even now writing an alternative syllabus for us. Must be one of the few witches in the country who doesn't think his appointment is a good idea."

"Smart lady." Alex commented. "Do you agree with her, Tyler?"

"I'm reserving judgement until I've had some lessons. I mean, I took an instant dislike to Snapey, but now I've got to know him a bit, I don't think he's so bad. So I don't want to be too hasty." Deanna said thoughtfully. "However, I have my doubts. My mother's professional judgement is rarely wrong."

They were interrupted by the arrival of the man himself, resplendent in lurid purple robes with lilac trim. Marlie immediately began simpering in a most unSlytherin way. The rest of them were less impressed.

"Greetings, children!" he beamed. "Shall we go in?" He opened the door and they all filed in after him, sitting down.

Lockhart looked at them all, grinning merrily. "Welcome to Defence Against the Dark Arts! I am Gilderoy Lockhart, your new professor, but I'm sure you all knew that! Especially if any of your mothers are familiar with that estimable publication, Witch Weekly." Again, the smile. It was not returned by anyone except Marlie. Lockhart didn't appear to notice.

"I notice from the register that we have some children whose parents are also noted fighters of Dark Arts. Chief Prosecutor Marcus Vetinari's son, Head of the DDAE and Auror Training Co-ordinator Melissa Lovegood's daughter, and the daughter of the witch who is as talented as she is beautiful, the lovely Caitlin Tyler, Commander of the Aurors and Deputy Head of the DDAE." He smiled widely at Deanna, who was staring right back at him, eyes wide in shock. Luella hoped it stayed that way, because when the shock wore off, Deanna would not be in a good mood. Lockhart was continuing.

"All very skilled mages, I don't doubt. However, although I've nothing against any of them, it's been a long while since they've been out there in the field, so to speak. I am here to show you the skills and qualities you'll need to take on the worst the world can through at you."

Luella hardly dared look at Deanna. When she did, her fears were confirmed. Shock had given way to a look of absolute fury. "My mother could have you in a fight any time, anywhere, Gilderoy!" she hissed savagely under her breath.

Lockhart continued, oblivious to the looks ranging from boredom to hatred that the Slytherins were giving him. Luella wondered idly whether Lockhart was brave or just incredibly dense.

"Right then!" he rubbed his hands gleefully. "Let's get started! We'll start with how I defeated the Werewolf of Warsaw in 1984. I think we'll do this as a little role-play. Let's see. I need a volunteer."

As one, all the Slytherins immediately sunk slowly down in their seats, staring at their desks, each of them willing him not to choose them. The only one not trying to hide was Marlie, who was sitting up, practically bursting with enthusiasm, waving her hand wildly in the air.

However, her efforts were in vain. Lockhart didn't even notice her. Instead, his eyes fell on Deanna. Deanna, cursing having met his eyes for even a brief moment, slid ever further down into her chair. Too late.

"Miss Tyler!" Lockhart called out jovially. "Why don't you help me out?" Deanna, crimson with embarrassment, got up and made her way reluctantly to the front, her classmates grinning with joy at seeing someone else getting singled out. Luella gave her friend a look of sympathy.

"Right, now, you can be the werewolf, while I'll be me. This is how it all started..." Lockhart proceeded to regale them with the tale of how he'd been called in to fight off the werewolf threatening a village, before making a seething Deanna assist him with re-enacting the final battle.

Finally, Deanna was allowed to crawl with embarrassment back to her seat. Luella gave her a hug as she slid furiously back into her chair.

"He's dead, Lu." Deanna hissed with rage. "I swear it, Lu, his days are bloody numbered!" She glared murderously at her teacher, who, thankfully, didn't notice.

"Any questions?" asked Lockhart. Rianne glanced at Deanna, grinned evilly, winked at her and raised her hand.

"Yes, Miss Stormosi?"

"Sir, given that werewolves have the strength of ten humans and that a bite from one will spread the curse, was it not perhaps unwise to engage in a bout of wrestling with it?"

Lockhart fell silent. "Ah, yes, well, Miss Stormosi, good question, I mean to say..." He faltered. Lucas, cottoning on all too swiftly to Rianne's plan, put his own hand up. "Yes, Vetinari?" Lockhart asked, rather relieved to be able to change the subject.

"Sir, why did you use an ordinary knife against it? Would you not have been better off using a silver one?" he asked innocently.

Lockhart stared at his class, a hint of panic in his eyes. All of them were giving him the same earnest look of attentiveness. Luella stifled the desire to laugh. This looked like being fun. She raised her own hand.

"Sir," she said earnestly, "why did you choose the night of the full moon? Wouldn't you have been better off hunting him at a different time of the month, while he was in human form and thus less dangerous?" She gave her most convincing thirsting-for-knowledge look.

Lockhart, his eyes darting wildly from one patient face to the next, seemed to come to a decision.

"Yes, well, very good all of you for managing to spot the deliberate mistakes. Five points each to Mr. Vetinari, Miss Martin and Miss Stormosi. Now for your

homework." He proceeded to set them an essay on the relevant chapter in *Gadding with Ghouls*, before hastily dismissing them.

The Slytherins filed out, grins on their faces. Deanna turned gratefully to Rianne, Luella and Lucas.

"Thank you." she said. "You three were wonderful. Did you see the look on his face?" she laughed.

"Any time, Tyler." grinned Rianne. "He who is so unwise as to make a Slytherin take part in a role-play against their will should be made to suffer."

"Plus it's fun." added Lucas. "Come on Stormer, let's go and plan what we can do to him next lesson!" Rianne laughed, and sauntered off with him, speculating what he'd be likely to set them next time.

Marlie was far less amused. "What were you thinking of, embarrassing poor Professor Lockhart like that?" she fumed.

"Er... because he started it by picking on me?" Deanna volunteered.

"Picking on you??" Marlie snapped. "I'd've loved to have been chosen!" Deanna and Luella rolled their eyes.

"Lighten up, Marls." Luella said. "We were just having a little joke. Honestly, you're normally well up for things like that. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!" snapped Marlie. She turned. "I'm going to talk to him and apologise for you lot. Honestly, I'm ashamed to be Slytherin, what must he think of us?" She stormed off in a huff. Deanna turned to Luella and shrugged.

"Well, at least it'll guarantee her getting the drama queen role she so clearly wants. Honestly, Lu, I knew love was blind, but I didn't know it was deaf, dumb and stupid too."

"She'll get over it." Luella said comfortingly. "Come on, this is Marlie we're talking about here. There are children's paddling pools with more depth than her. This time next year, it'll be another pretty face who she's declaring everlasting love for. You just wait."

"I hope so." Deanna sighed. "I sincerely hope so."

Professor Severus Snape watched his fourth year Potions class file in and sit down. Under most circumstances, the thought of being about to teach another class of uninspiring and bored students would have caused him to sink into his most cynical mood. But this was no ordinary class.

His keen eyesight picked them out almost immediately. Inseparable, inspirational, unmistakable. Luella Martin and Deanna Tyler. Luella with her lively, bewitching, silver-blue eyes, dark brown hair cascading around a face that would one day have men falling at her feet, friendly, compassionate, kind and gentle, yet with a quick wit and fierce intelligence that could leave the unwary wondering what on earth had just happened to them. And next to her, Deanna with her flowing raven locks, sharp features, proud expression that said all too clearly "Don't mess", piercing black eyes, and a personality you could not ignore, all masking a tenderness and kind heart that would leave most stunned if they ever saw it. She wasn't conventionally pretty like Luella was shaping up to be, but Severus had no doubts whatsoever that she too would one day command as much male attention as her friend, from sheer force of personality alone. Of course, none of them would ever be good enough for her, but it would be amusing watching her break their hearts nonetheless. He couldn't help smiling at both girls. Both so special in their own way, both so, well, wonderful.

The lesson proceeded normally enough. However, Severus couldn't help noticing how attentive Deanna was being. Normally, although she didn't exactly misbehave, she usually looked bored out of her skull. Today, however, she actually seemed to be listening. And her potion, normally nothing special, was as good as anything Rianne Stormosi could come up with. Was it possible that Deanna Tyler was actually putting some effort in? The thought warmed his heart.

At length, he dismissed the class and began to go through their newly handed in assignments. He heard the door closing behind the last of them and settled down to get on with some marking. Until a shape hovering near his desk distracted him.

He looked up sharply. And relaxed on seeing Deanna standing there.

"Miss Tyler. Hello again." he smiled. Deanna slid into a chair opposite him, and smiled back, the expression lighting up her face. Severus revised his earlier opinion on Deanna not being conventionally pretty. That smile could melt hearts from a hundred paces, he thought. Must have inherited it from her mother.

"Hello sir." she said, slightly nervous, but unable to stop smiling.

"Can I help you with something, Miss Tyler?" Severus asked goodnaturedly, if a little confused at her presence.

Deanna shifted a little. "Well, no, not really. I just came to see how you were doing."

Severus raised an eyebrow, fighting back the urge to grin like an idiot. "Most touching. Why?"

Deanna blushed. Staring at the desk, she mumbled "Because..." She stopped, trying to pick her words. At length, she looked up at him. "I've not seen you since June. I missed you." She immediately dropped her eyes. Severus felt that warm fuzzy feeling start enveloping him again.

"I've missed you too." he said softly. Deanna looked up in surprise. She was still blushing, but that rarely seen infectious smile was back.

For a while they did nothing but look at each other, just gazing into each other's eyes. Severus realised what a fool he must look like, but didn't care. Anything for Deanna's attention, anything at all.

Deanna broke eye contact first, laughing merrily, sounding exactly like Caitlin had done in more innocent days. "I'm sorry." she laughed. "Gods, I can't believe I told you that. Can't believe I'm even here. I'd better go." She made to leave.

"Wait." Severus said. "Don't go. Stay here for a while. I like your company."

Deanna sat down again. "Really?"

"Yes, really. And if I may, I'd like the opportunity to enjoy it for a while, just for once not needing to advise, counsel or discipline you."

"OK." Deanna said, surprised but pleased. "Were you pleased with my potion then?" she asked, grinning.

"I was very impressed. I had no idea you were so talented. And you were paying attention as well, I noticed. What did I do to deserve all this?" he said, not unkindly.

Deanna met his gaze, all traces of shyness fading. "You listened to me." she said quietly. "And you've never ever embarrassed me. You're a good teacher, you know. Lu was right about you." Her expression changed. "Unlike that tosser Lockhart."

"Language, Deanna." Severus said mildly.

"Well he is!" Deanna protested. "Do you know what he had me doing?"

"What did he have you doing?" Severus asked, beginning to grin.

"He had me taking part in a role-play!" Deanna fumed. "A friggin' role-play! With him! In front of everyone! I've never been so humiliated in all my life!" She gazed furiously at Severus. "The man deserves to die."

Severus winced. "You poor, poor child! Never mind, my dear. I am sure you and your friends will be able to devise a fitting revenge. The usual caveats apply - I don't want to know about it, I don't want any evidence connecting it with you."

Deanna grinned. "Well, Lu, Ri and Lucas sorted out House honour there and then." She proceeded to explain how the three of them had managed to make Lockhart squirm. Severus laughed out loud.

"Ah, I'm so proud of them. The Class of '96 is going to be one of those vintage years for Slytherin, I can feel it now. Incidentally, Professor McGonagall did the timetabling. And I believe she gave Lockhart your class as his first one not long after he'd roguishly told her how easy Animagism had been to learn, how he was surprised more people didn't have the ability, he'd found it no trouble, and if she ever needed any help with her Transfiguration research, all she had to do was ask."

It was now Deanna's turn to laugh. "It's not just me, is it? He **is** systematically putting everyone's back up, isn't he?"

"It would seem so." Severus said calmly. "Oddly enough, he has yet to really bother me. Evidently even he is not that stupid."

"It wouldn't surprise me." Deanna observed. "Don't speak too soon, you could well be next. Now you getting your revenge on him, that'd be interesting to see. He's already managed to upset Mum, you two could work together on stitching him up."

"Deanna, stop trying to incite me into doing something that would no doubt land both me and your mother in a lot of trouble. Although I've no doubt it would be well worth it."

Deanna laughed. "Oh, it would, I'm sure." She recalled why she was there in the first place. "Actually, sir, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

Severus felt his good mood begin to evaporate. "Oh yes." he said, settling himself for trouble. "What is it? I hope you're not planning anything against the school rules."

"Oh no." said Deanna. "It's about Ginny. You know, Ginny Weasley. Fred and George's sister."

"Ah, the notorious Miss Weasley. I had the pleasure of meeting her this morning. I had no idea she was in Slytherin. Aren't all her family Gryffindor?"

"They are. That's the problem." Deanna said, turning serious.

"Problem?" asked Severus.

"She's grown up thinking of herself as a Gryffindor, among Gryffindors. She's got no idea how to go about being one of us. And we're a bit worried about how she's going to find it here. Which is why the four of us had a little meeting last night. We've decided to look out for her, make sure she's OK."

"Very noble of you. However, she seems on friendly enough terms with Miss Vettinari and Miss Montague. I am sure she will cope. After all, if the Hat put her in Slytherin, she must have some potential." said Severus, beginning to relax now he wasn't actually going to have to get involved.

"Well, yes, but until she can develop all that potential, she's going to need help, isn't she? Which is where you come in."

Severus felt his heart sink. "What do you want me to do, Deanna?"

"Nothing, really. We just want you to keep an eye on her, make sure she's OK. We were a bit worried that..." Deanna paused, wondering how to phrase this without offending her notoriously volatile House Master. Severus watched her, intrigued despite himself, waiting for her to finish her sentence.

"We just wanted to make sure that you didn't treat her any differently than the rest of the Slytherins." Deanna said, avoiding her teacher's eyes. "We just wanted to make sure you saw her as a Slytherin rather than a Weasley, if you get my drift."

She looked up. To her relief, far from being angry, he was actually smiling.

"You wanted to make sure I refrained from being overly sarcastic towards her, isn't that right? Touching. Very diplomatic way of putting it, by the way, I'm quite impressed."

"Thank you, sir." Deanna mumbled.

"No trouble. Allow me to lay your fears to rest. Miss Weasley struck me as quite a charming young lady, not at all like her troublemaking and obnoxious brothers. In your capable hands, I am quite sure she will mature into a fine young example of Slytherin at its finest. Have no fear, I don't intend to be harsh towards her unless her behaviour should merit it. Never let it be said that I treat my Slytherins badly."

"No, just everyone else in the school." said Deanna, grinning.

Severus shrugged. "I've no responsibility to the other students except to teach them Potions. They don't interest me - so predictable, most of them. Slytherins, on the other hand, with the possible exceptions of Messrs Crabbe and Goyle, are as fascinating and varied as cloud formations, each one a marvel in their own way. I wouldn't be Head of any other House if I had the choice. You and your housemates never fail to challenge, amuse and surprise me with each passing day. I daresay you teach me as much as I'm meant to teach you."

Deanna inclined her head. "Didn't you once say I was everything a Slytherin should be?"

"I believe so. And it's still true." Severus said, looking deep into her eyes. My daughter, he thought proudly. My wonderful, beautiful daughter. He felt a surge of paternal pride rush through him, watching her there, blushing but smiling happily. "Deanna Tyler, it is still so very true."

So it was that Severus was in a better than usual mood as he settled down in the Hogwarts staff room. Minerva McGonagall noticed at once, and took a seat next to him.

"You're in a rather cheery mood, Severus. What's happened?" she asked curiously.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." Severus said, grinning. "By the way, Minerva, may I just congratulate you on giving Gilderoy the Slytherin fourth year as his first class. A stroke of genius, I must say. They managed to find no less than three different things wrong with his account of how he defeated the Werewolf of Warsaw, and I'm positive it would have been more if Lockhart had let them continue. Excellent work, Minerva."

McGonagall tried not to laugh. "This is what happens when I get caught in a moment of weakness. And he did say he wanted a challenge."

"And you don't get much more challenging than a class with Deanna Tyler in it." Severus mused. He noticed the expression on Professor McGonagall's face change to one of abject misery. "Minerva? What's wrong... oh." He felt his good mood evaporate as Lockhart came bounding over to their table, a huge smile plastered all over his face.

"Hello, Minerva! And Severus!" he beamed, slapping them both on the back. "Just the man I was looking for!"

Severus gritted his teeth. "What is it, Gilderoy?"

"I just had the pleasure of teaching some of your pupils this morning. The Slytherin fourth year. Such cheeky little scamps, aren't they?" he grinned. Severus fought back the urge to punch him.

"If you say so, Gilderoy." he said shortly.

Lockhart didn't appear to notice Severus's irritation.

"That young daughter of Caitlin Tyler's is quite the feisty one, isn't she?" Lockhart continued blithely. "So like her mother at the same age. I predict she'll be quite skilled at fighting the Dark Arts when she's older. She just needs a little tuition from the likes of me, and to learn her limits. Overconfidence in her abilities, that could break the young lady if she's not careful."

Severus couldn't help wondering if Lockhart had noticed the irony in that last sentence.

"I'm sure her mother has schooled her well in knowledge of Defence Against the Dark Arts." he said, bristling.

"Yes, Caitlin Tyler's hardly the type to neglect that aspect of her child's upbringing." McGonagall said primly.

Lockhart smiled indulgently. "Even a witch as talented and charming as the lovely Caitlin Tyler has room for improvement. I met her in Diagon Alley only this summer, and I was saying to her then how if the DDAE needed any help, all they had to do was ask. Seemed quite grateful for the offer."

"Grateful?" Severus asked quietly, too quietly. Professor McGonagall looked nervously from one man to the other, recognising the look on Severus's face all too well.

"Oh yes." beamed Lockhart. "She seemed rather disappointed that I wouldn't be available for longer. I did say that I would only be able to do a few weeks, and she looked positively depressed."

Severus tightened his grip on his coffee mug. "Depressed?" he hissed.

"Certainly saddened. You know, I think I made quite an impression on her. Such an adorable lady, so sweet and charming. Do you think she'd object to seeing me again?" Lockhart asked hopefully.

Severus slammed his mug down on the table, almost overcome by the urge to grab Lockhart by the throat and smash his face through the nearest window. McGonagall reacted immediately, hastily grabbing his arm.

"Leave it, Severus." she whispered in his ear. Lockhart continued, blithely unaware of Severus's reaction.

"You know, the more I think about it, the better it sounds! The Ministry's most glamourous Auror, and the world's best-looking and most famous fighter of Dark Arts. I can see it now. The *Daily Prophet* would have a field day. Think of the photos! The publicity! We'd have the front page for weeks. I just hope Ms. Tyler's not the jealous type, I do get a lot of fan mail from witches. But I'm sure she'd be more than accommodating, if it meant being Mrs. Gilderoy Lockhart!" He sighed romantically. "Is she attached, do either of you two know?"

Severus's coffee mug exploded, sending the contents flying everywhere. McGonagall took in Severus clutching the arms of his chair, knuckles white, face twisted with rage, and swiftly intervened before Severus's self-control snapped.

"I think she's quite happy being single at the moment, Gilderoy." she said, not taking her eyes off Severus.

Lockhart sighed. "True, true. But if she knew I was interested..." He got up. "I'm going to owl her, see if she'd be interested in doing anything. Thank you, Minerva, Severus, you've been most encouraging! Just for that, I'll make sure you get the best seats at the wedding!" He beamed at them both, oblivious to the looks Severus was giving him, and left.

McGonagall hardly dared look at Severus. He was glaring at the departing Lockhart, and McGonagall could only reflect that it was a good thing Avada Kedavra couldn't be cast through the eyes alone. Finally, he turned back to her, his eyes blazing wrathfully.

"How *dare* he?" he snarled. "How can he possibly have the nerve to think that Caitlin would ever look twice at him? She wouldn't even tolerate him crawling on his hands and knees for her, begging for her favours. Caitlin would not, would never, under any possible circumstances, be interested in him!" He paused, jealous rage giving way to a sudden insecurity. "She wouldn't, would she?"

"I'm sure she wouldn't, Severus. She's got far too much sense to be swayed by good looks and charm alone." McGonagall said primly.

Severus was not convinced. Visions of Caitlin on Lockhart's arm, gazing up at him adoringly, were suddenly forcing themselves upon him. "There's some very intelligent

witches of far more experience than her who've fallen for him." he said shortly. "And she's been single for so long... Dear gods, suppose she fell for him in a moment of weakness?" He looked at Professor McGonagall in horror.

"Severus!" she snapped. "Unless Caitlin Tyler's character has changed radically since she was at school, which I doubt from what I've heard, she is unlikely to entertain any sentimental feelings for him. Far more chance of her just wanting a physical relationship out of him."

Severus's jaw dropped in shock. "What??" he almost screamed. For some reason, the thought of Caitlin having random, meaningless sex with Lockhart disturbed him more than the idea of her being in love with him. He shot to his feet. "Right! That does it! I'm going over there! I'm going to see for myself. She can't, she mustn't, she doesn't want any kind of relationship with Gilderoy Lockhart! She just can't!" He stormed out of the staff room. McGonagall sighed, head in her hands. Severus always had been somewhat overprotective where Caitlin's love life had been concerned, even when he had been involved elsewhere (which hadn't been often, certainly he'd not been involved with anyone since he started teaching, but still), but she hadn't expected him to react this badly. She just hoped Caitlin Tyler was still as adept at dealing with an angry Severus as she used to be.

In and out. In and out. Easy does it, Caitlin thought to herself as she worked out in her home gym. These Muggle exercise things weren't that difficult really, not once you got used to them. The important thing was to establish a rhythm, and keep your concentration. As long as you stayed focused, you could keep this up indefinitely. As long as you weren't distracted...

There came a sudden series of bangs. Caitlin started with a shock, dropped the dumbbells she was using, and shrieked in pain as the weights twisted her arm painfully. Again that banging, and now a voice, a man's voice.

"Caitlin! Caitlin, I know you're in there. Let me in, we need to talk." Caitlin recognised the voice as that of Severus Snape, and he did not sound happy. Cursing furiously under her breath and rubbing her arm, she wrapped a towel around her shoulders, picked up her wand and strode purposefully to the front door.

No sooner had she opened the door than Severus pushed past her and walked straight into her front room. Caitlin followed him, too surprised that he'd invaded her inner sanctum like this to be angry at him.

"Severus, what on earth...?"

"Is it true?" he snarled at her. "Well? Is it?"

"Is what true?" she asked, bewildered.

"You and... and... Lockhart!" He spat the name at her in fury. "He says that you're interested in him! Are you?" He glared at her.

Caitlin felt the shock begin to wear off, to be replaced with a slow burning anger. "Me? Interested in Lockhart? Gilderoy Lockhart?"

"Who else?" Severus snapped.

"Me and Lockhart?" Caitlin stared in disbelief. "Severus, there is no one I am less attracted to than Gilderoy Lockhart! How on earth you could possibly think for a second that I would see anything in him is beyond me! I'd rather go out with Lucius Malfoy than Lockhart. In fact, come to think of it, I'd rather go out with *you* than Gilderoy Lockhart." Caitlin felt positively disgusted at the thought

"So... you're not going to be dating him then." Severus said uncertainly.

"No." Caitlin said firmly.

"No wedding pictures special in *Witch Weekly*?"

"No."

"What about some random meaningless sex?"

"Severus, I've told you before, I'm not sleeping with you."

"Not me! Him!"

"No chance, I don't need the hate mail!" Caitlin laughed. She gazed coolly at Severus, who was now looking rather sheepish. It suddenly occurred to her what had prompted his little visit. "Why, Severus," she purred softly. "can it be you're jealous?"

Severus shifted uncomfortably. "No." he said, unconvincingly. Caitlin smiled, a hungry predatory smile, replete with the knowledge of one closely attuned to her prey's every feeling, every thought. All of a sudden, the balance of power appeared to have shifted decisively in her favour. He's jealous! she thought. Jealous as hell, and doesn't want to admit it. Because he's not my lover and there's absolutely nothing he can do about it. Ah, Sevi, Sevi, Sevi, is this what love has brought you to? She continued to gaze at him, suddenly finding herself aroused, very aroused. Aroused by the power she realised she had over him. She moved that little bit closer, enjoying his discomfiture immensely.

"Liar." she murmured. "You just can't help yourself, can you? You can tolerate me not wanting you, but you can't stomach for one minute the idea of me wanting someone else, can you? You men, you're all the same. You had this idea of me as some shell-shocked little victim, too traumatised to want anyone, and still hopelessly in love with you, didn't you? What, did you think I'd been living like a nun all this time? I've had my fair share of love affairs, let me tell you. Even with a child. Motherhood didn't kill my sex drive, you know! I just had to be rather more discreet with my love life, that's all. Deanna never knew. All those missions that required me to be away from home? Most were genuine, but not all. And there's a whole host of young male Aurors who had their first initiations into the Arts of Love from yours truly."

"Caitlin, if you're trying to impress me with tales of your sexual prowess, stop it." Severus said through gritted teeth. "I'm well aware men can't stop themselves wanting you. I'm just saddened that you were that insecure that you needed constant proof of the fact."

"Or just jealous that you weren't getting any." said Caitlin, taking full advantage of knowing that he'd been celibate for the best part of a decade.

Severus tried to remain dignified. "I chose to abstain, Caitlin. It wasn't forced on me. For some strange reason, I'd had enough. I needed peace and solitude, Hogwarts provided it. So don't try and make me feel guilty for not playing the whore like you evidently were." Anger tinged his words, but it was underlaid by a feeling of woundedness, hurt that she'd not saved herself for him, as he had for her. But then, he reflected, are you really surprised?

Caitlin drew in her breath, her eyes glittering with cold. Without a word, she reached back and hit him, hard.

Severus watched her fist flying towards him in slow motion. Now that could be painful, he thought idly. The blow connected with force, sending him sprawling to the floor, agony exploding into his soul as his skull collided with the wrought-iron fireplace. I was right, he thought. It was. He tasted blood, and felt liquid running down his face. See, Caitlin? he wanted to scream at her. I'm giving my life-blood for you. Are you happy now? Are you?

Caitlin stood there, watching him, somehow managing to combine the curiosity of a child and the malice of someone old beyond their years.

"What's the matter, Sevi?" she chanted in a terrifying singsong voice. "Are you hurt?"

"Most perceptive, Tyler." Severus snarled at her. "Are you satisfied yet, or shall we both carry on with the who-can-wound-the-deepest game?"

Caitlin laughed and dropped to the floor, bringing her face close to his.

"It's nice to see you haven't lost your ability to come up with the smart remarks when your back's up against the wall. Hold onto it, you'll need those one-liners in the future. They are so wonderful at keeping the rest of the world out, aren't they?"

"Get to the point, Tyler. What is it that you want?"

"What do I want?" Caitlin asked thoughtfully. A grim smile crossed her lips. "Well, right now Sevi, I want some mindless physical gratification. Don't you?" She ran her fingers tenderly down his chest, feeling the power flow through her. All the time since we started talking again, it's been him chasing me, she thought. He's been the one with all the trump cards and I've been on the run. She smiled cruelly, enjoying the unexpected role reversal, getting a buzz out of watching Severus want her and not want her. Let's see how you like being the hunted one, she thought. Let's see!

"Why so afraid, Sevi? Don't tell me you've lost interest."

"It's not that." Severus said, his voice betraying more than a hint of fear. "It's just... here, now, it doesn't feel... It doesn't feel right." He backed away from her, afraid, very afraid, using a nearby armchair to haul himself back to his feet and put some kind of barrier between them. This wasn't the Caitlin he thought he knew, wasn't the Caitlin he'd thought about, fantasised about for so long.

"Doesn't feel right?" Caitlin laughed. "Severus, you have never lost the opportunity to try and seduce me. Never mind how I felt. Never mind that maybe the thought of having you anywhere near me made me feel physically ill."

"I'm sorry. Caitlin, I'm sorry, love. I really am." Severus pleaded in desperation. "I didn't do it to hurt you, I didn't want to humiliate you. I just wanted you near me. I just wanted..." He stopped, letting the feeling flow through him, tasting it before revealing it. "I just wanted you to love me."

Caitlin said nothing. For a moment, she almost looked sorry. Her eyes softened as something like pity crept in there.

Severus held his breath. Had she relented? Was he safe?

"So touching, Severus. So very, very touching." A bittersweet smile played across her lips. "You know, I'm rather glad you said that. It will make what I'm about to do all the more poignant."

Severus felt the hope drain out of him. Caitlin's tender mood had passed, and the playful dominatrix was back. She raised her wand.

"Dishabilius!"

Severus gasped as his robes fell from him. "Caitlin, what the hell...?" He tried desperately to cover himself. Caitlin just laughed. Jumping to her feet, she spun round and dealt him a high-kick to the face, catching him off-balance and sending him sprawling to the floor again.

Severus dared to look her in the eye. He immediately wished he hadn't. He'd seen that look before, but never in his life did he think he'd see it in Caitlin's eyes. It was that same cold, ruthless, ever-so-slightly insane look he'd seen in the eyes of his fellow Death Eaters when they'd tortured their victims. The same look he'd no doubt had when he'd torn lives apart in his turn. He never thought he'd be on the receiving end though.

"Caitlin, love." he pleaded. "Please. Don't do this. I'm begging you. Please."

Caitlin sneered, feeding off his helplessness, his vulnerability only heightening her arousal. "Touching. You look so cute when you're pleading for mercy. I must say, this torturing thing's rather amusing, isn't it? I'm not surprised you joined Voldemort, it is fun." She raised her wand. "*Crucio.*"

Severus screamed in pain. Let it end, let it end! he thought as the pain sliced through his insides, twisting and turning them, setting him on fire, obliterating his whole world until there was nothing but the pain left to convince him he was still alive.

It faded, and the world came rushing back. Slowly, he uncurled from the foetal position he had no memory of assuming. It wasn't the first time he'd had that particular curse performed on him, but he didn't remember it hurting so much back then. He raised his eyes to look at Caitlin, and opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. There were no words really.

"Ah, Severus, you suffer so prettily." Caitlin whispered hungrily. "It's as if you were born for me to torment." She gazed at him almost tenderly, exhilarating in the hurt and confusion on his face. "You know, you look so beautiful when you're hurting." She raised her wand again. "*Crucio*."

Had that last time been the most painful thing in the world? Ha! That had been nothing, Severus thought as the pain knifed through him again. Oddly enough, he felt strangely detached by this time, as if all this was happening to someone else. Someone else screaming, someone else thrashing around on Caitlin's Axminster.

The pain eased. Severus collapsed in exhaustion. He had just enough energy left to gaze unhappily up at her, his beautiful tormentor. She was standing over him now, cool and unmoved, and so heartrendingly seductive. I love you, he thought. Even when you're torturing me. Gods, how sick am I?

"Do you fear me?" Caitlin asked softly. Severus recalled the conversation, almost exactly a year ago, when he'd said the same thing to her. She'd denied it, but not convincingly. How things had changed.

"Yes." he whispered, each word taking it in turns to stab him in the heart as it forced its way into the world. "Yes, I'm terrified of you."

Caitlin laughed. "Smart enough to admit it at last, I see." Her gaze swept downwards. "And yet your own body's betraying you. So pathetic. So pathetic that even now, after all this, that you still want me. That you're still in love with me, after all this time."

Severus winced as she mockingly echoed his own words back to him. "All right, Caitlin, you've made your point." he said harshly. "Now give me back my robes and wand and let me go. I'll not bother you again."

Caitlin was no longer smiling. She was now looking at him very thoughtfully. "Have I, though?" she said to herself. "Have I really made my point?" Calmly, she raised her wand, her eyes cold and impassive. "*Petrificus Totalus!*"

Severus realised too late what she was going to do. The curse hit him before he could dodge it, causing his arms and legs to freeze to attention, leaving him vulnerable, helpless and entirely at her mercy.

Caitlin placed her wand to one side, dropped to her knees and crawled over to him in silence. Severus wished she'd taunt him again, the mockery had been infinitely

preferable. However, there was nothing he could do, absolutely nothing. She'd rendered him completely powerless. He couldn't even close his eyes to shut it out as Caitlin straddled him, never once taking her eyes off his, and began to execute a precise, brutal and above all, appropriate, revenge.

Severus lay there quietly, not wanting to move even though Caitlin had released him from the curse almost as soon as she'd finished. She'd rearranged her clothes, taken her wand, freed him, and walked out without a word or a backwards glance. She was now in the shower, no doubt wanting to cleanse herself of the taint his touch had evidently left on her.

Slowly, he reached for his robes and pulled them to him, after lying there for what seemed like forever. However, he didn't get dressed straight away. Right now, he was too stunned to do anything other than curl into a ball, clutching at his robes like some kind of security blanket. How could you, Cait? he thought miserably. How could you? But even as he asked the question, he knew the answer. She could do it because I did it to her first. I changed her from a fun-loving, carefree young woman into a cold, ruthless killing machine. That's how, he thought. Well, congratulations, Severus. Here's your reward.

Caitlin walked back in, fully dressed in the royal blue velvet robes that he'd always loved and which always suited her. Severus felt his heart break to look at her. Still so beautiful, he thought with a pang of desire. Why the hell can't I stop loving you?

She raised an eyebrow on seeing him there. "You still here?" she said. "I would have thought you'd be long gone by now." She walked over to the mirror above the fire, and began putting her earrings in. "You'd better hurry up, you know. I've got to go to work soon, I don't want you in here while I'm gone. Well?" She reached for a hairbrush and began running it through her hair. Severus picked himself up and numbly pulled his clothes back on.

Finally, he was done. He headed for the front door. As he reached the doorway to the hall, he stopped, compelled to look at Caitlin again, desperate for some kind of meaning, some kind of closure to the evening's events. She saw him in the mirror and turned to face him curiously.

For a moment, they just looked at each other, he with hurt and anguish, she just mildly surprised. Severus spoke first.

"Caitlin, why?" was all he could say.

Her face changed, and for the first time that evening, he saw something like hurt in her eyes.

"Because I wanted you to know what it felt like for me." she said softly.

"Well, congratulations Caitlin." Severus said roughly. "You've got your wish."

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Chapter Five The Redemption Starts Here

Screaming. Begging. Pleading. That was all she could hear. Just this voice, a voice she knew intimately, a voice she cared about but just couldn't place, begging for mercy, alternately screaming and sobbing.

"Don't hurt me, please. Please!" she could hear him crying.

"I won't hurt you!" she called out in desperation. "Where are you?"

He didn't seem to hear her. The screaming had stopped now, to be replaced with something more terrible, the sound of crying.

"I'm sorry, love. I'm so, so sorry."

"What for? It's all right, I'm here. Just tell me where you are, I'll help you." she said, fear rising within her. Dear god, was he all right? What had happened to him? She pushed through the darkness, trying to sense what direction the voice was coming from, desperately trying to find him. I've got to find him, she thought, got to. I'm the only one who can help, the only one who can heal him, if I don't reach him, something awful is going to happen.

The crying seemed to intensify. As if they were linked by some undefinable bond, she was hit by a wave of the most horrifying loneliness and despair she'd ever felt, the worst she could ever imagine feeling. Dear god, something terrible already *has* happened, she thought, panic beginning to set in. I've got to find him, please god, let him be all right, *let him be all right!*

The crying was getting fainter. I'm losing him, she thought in terror. Losing the connection. Don't leave me, don't leave me, please!

The sound died away and was gone. He was gone. Gone forever, into some silent hell of his own devising, suffering, beyond help now. She felt pain rake her own heart, a searing sense of loss and bereavement. Screaming his name (for she surely recognised him now; no other man had ever raised such depth of feeling in her), she sank sobbing to her knees.

Luella opened her eyes, blinking as her sight adjusted to the darkness. Reaching for her wand, she whispered the Lumos spell and looked about her. Safe in her own bed at Hogwarts, and unlike her last nightmare, no one moving around the dorm this time.

The thought brought her no relief. The sense of fear remained with her. The only consolation was that this time, it wasn't terror she was going to die. No, this was an altogether more intimate kind of fear; the fear that a loved one was in danger, had been hurt.

She wasn't so naive as to think that it had just been a dream. Slytherin Redeemers did not just have bad dreams. Getting up, she pushed back the curtains and checked on her friends.

Rianne was lying on her side, sleeping peacefully enough. Marlie was on her back, hair spread out all over the pillow, snoring blissfully. Deanna was practically hidden underneath her blankets, curled up in a ball, looking rather cute, although she would have been mortified to know that. Luella smiled and left them to their dreams. Hope they're nicer than mine, she thought.

She returned her attention back to the dream. All right, so the person in question probably wasn't dead. Even now she could still sense some kind of connection with him. Yes, he was alive. But in what sort of state? All she could feel was this empty, aching despair, this raw pain as if her very veins had been laid bare. A desperate, needing pain, crying out for love, crying out for healing. Crying out for her.

Not by name. But it was crying out for someone to help ease the pain, and she could hardly leave him to suffer.

She tried to recall the end of the dream, when she'd sunk to the floor screaming his name. Slipping away from her already, the memory of the name had faded like a ghost in sunlight. Who are you, she thought helplessly. How can I help you when I don't even know who you are?

Luella settled herself into Marlie's beanbag, absently petting Sooty as she leapt into her lap. Beginning to relax and focus her thoughts, she let her mind wander, seeking out this mysterious, troubled stranger. Where is he? Who is he? What do I do next? she mused to herself.

In the stillness of the night, a reply came to her. Seek out Professor Snape. Go to his office, find him, talk to him. If he is not there, wait for him. You are needed there tonight.

Luella got to her feet, and began to get dressed, pulling on jeans, t-shirt and a thick grey jumper to keep her from getting cold. Fastening her school cloak over the top to assist in concealing her, she cast a glamour around herself and set out.

Severus slipped silently into the Hogwarts Entrance Hall. It had been some hours now since he'd left Caitlin's. He'd walked into the night in a daze, and by some miracle had ended up flagging down the Knight Bus. The conductor, driver and passengers had given him the strangest looks, some of them even recognising him, but a typical Severus Snape glare had silenced them. Doing his best to ignore the curious stares, and the whispers along the lines of "Is that...?" "What's he doing round here?" and "What the hell happened to him?" that had broken out as soon as he'd curled up in one of the beds, he'd vainly tried to get some sleep. Finally, the bus had let him off outside the school doors, and he'd staggered gratefully out. At last, almost back at his dungeon sanctuary, where there was peace, solitude and a bottle of very strong brandy waiting for him. He checked the clock in the entrance hall. One in the morning. No one around, for which he was infinitely grateful. The thought of having to explain where he'd been and what had happened to him did not appeal in the slightest. After all, how did you tell someone that you'd been forcibly restrained, rendered absolutely powerless, had intense pain inflicted on you and been coerced into sexual intercourse against your will by Caitlin Tyler? Especially when scenes of just that nature formed a large part of the sexual fantasies of most of the adult wizard population of Great Britain? You didn't, of course. He could just imagine it now, the likes of Flitwick, Lockhart and Kettleburn all saying dreamily "Caitlin Tyler clad in tight-fitting, skimpy Lycra? Abusing you and hurting you? Then making you have sex with her? You lucky, lucky bastard!" before sighing with bliss and passing out. How ironic, right up until a few hours ago, he'd have been thinking much the same thing. If anyone else had come to him with a story like that, his main feeling would have been one of deep, deep envy. Actually, no, he thought, his main feeling would probably have been something along the lines of a furious, jealous rage that anyone else had dared to touch his Caitlin, but envy would definitely have been there somewhere.

Severus shook his head in disbelief. His Caitlin? What was he thinking? She'd never really been his, and after tonight, probably never would be. And yet he couldn't shake her image out of his mind. Quickenning his pace as he made for the safety of his dungeon sanctuary, he tried to hold back the tears. Why the hell do I still have to love you, Cait? he thought. Why can't I just get over you? He shuddered. He'd never felt so tainted, never felt so repulsive as he did now. All he could think was how worthless he was, how Caitlin would never want him now. He laughed bitterly. Good gods, what was he thinking? Idiotic, he knew, but part of him desperately wanted to go back to her, was desperate for any kind of reaction from her. I'll serve you forever, Caitlin, you can do whatever you want to me, I'll let you use and abuse me, I'll suffer all the pain you can dream up for me, just let me be near you. Severus felt his heart breaking. Caitlin Tyler, what the hell have you done to me? he thought.

He entered his deserted classroom and made straight for his office and inner sanctum. Fumbling with his wand as he opened the door, he couldn't help laughing bitterly at himself.

"You were right, love." he whispered. "I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?"

"Professor?" a girl's voice came from behind him. Severus spun round. Luella was sitting there, perched on a desk in what he had wrongly assumed had been an empty classroom. She was dressed simply in Muggle clothes, with her school cloak for warmth, wand illuminating her and revealing an expression of fear and concern, changing to one of horror when she saw his face.

Slipping off the desk, she walked swiftly over to him. "My god, what on earth happened to you?" she whispered in shock. She reached out to touch his cheek, too stunned to say anything else.

"Nothing." he snapped, brushing her hand away. "Miss Martin, what the hell are you doing up, it is long past curfew."

"It was you, wasn't it?" whispered Luella, not appearing to have heard him. "It was you, in my dream. I could hear someone sobbing, crying for help, could feel their pain, and knew I had to heal them. Couldn't find them though, and then I woke up. I didn't know what to do, just had this feeling that something was wrong, that I was needed more than I'd ever been. Then I could almost hear this voice telling me to find you, that I was needed here tonight." Her eyes pierced his as she reached up to touch his injuries again. "Are you all right?" she asked in a hushed voice. He flinched as her fingers brushed across the bruises on his face, but this time he did not push her away, as the look in his eyes changed from one of anger to one of deep, fathomless need.

Severus felt his bravado collapse. He was suddenly very aware of a longing for company. From a student? a little voice whispered. She's no ordinary student, he thought. She's got a reputation as a good listener. And gods know she's already seen too much now. He felt his self-control snap as the loneliness of thirty eight years finally overwhelmed him.

"Ah, Luella." he sighed. "Not even you could redeem this Slytherin. But I don't want to be alone tonight. Come in." He opened the office door for her. Luella sheathed her wand, pulled her cloak round her and walked in.

Luella settled herself into a chair, her eyes not leaving her Potions master for a second. He said nothing to her, just reaching into a cupboard by the wall and producing a glass tumbler and a bottle labelled Old McCromerty's Finest Firewater, before pouring himself a drink and sinking into the chair opposite. He took a swig of it and leant back in his seat, smiling bitterly at Luella.

"Forgive me if I don't offer you a drink, but I really don't think you'd like this. It's not a beverage for the young, this. You need maturity, experience and a taste of life's bitterer lessons to really appreciate a good brandy. An excellent painkiller though, and

not just for the body either." He knocked back the rest and poured himself another. Falling into silence, he sat there, staring into space with those haunted black eyes of his. Luella had seen that expression in them before on occasion, but never for so long. Never so openly. Normally, he'd be hiding the emotion before she'd even registered properly that it was there. Not tonight.

Luella drew her cloak around her, the cold and dark oppressing her. "Professor," she said timidly, "is there any way we can have the fire on? It's not very warm in here."

For the first time that evening, Severus allowed himself a smile. "Of course you can, child. *Ignito*." The fire roared into life, dispelling the gloom in an instant, bathing the entire room in a golden glow, warming Luella's skin like the sun after a week of rain. She noticed Severus responding to it as well, for he seemed to sit up and revel in the dancing firelight.

He saw her watching him. "What, can't take your eyes off me?" he said, a hint of laughter hovering around his features. "Now there's a first. I was never beautiful before and I doubt I'm any better looking now."

Luella bit back the first thought that came to her mind. That thought being that even with lurid purple bruises flowering on his face and dried blood forming an intricate web around the swollen cuts that marred his features, Severus Snape still looked extraordinarily attractive to her eyes. Cloaked in sadness and misery as he was, with eyes that looked like they'd seen the very depths of hell itself, clutching his brandy glass as if his life depended on its numbing, soothing qualities, he exuded an aura of vulnerability and defencelessness that drew Luella irresistibly to him. I want to heal you, I want to take your pain away, and yet... Luella couldn't help thinking that she didn't want this moment to end. She'd never seen him without his usual defences up before, apart from the occasional unguarded moment, and she certainly wasn't averse to seeing him so laid bare now. This is the real Severus Snape, she thought, the awareness hitting her like a physical blow. And my god, he's amazing.

But all she said was "You don't look too bad."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Compared to what? And looks can be very deceiving, Luella. Trust me, I'm not at all what I seem."

"What, so you're not a vicious, sarcastic sadist, then?" Luella grinned, attempting to lighten the atmosphere.

Severus laughed, but there was no humour there. "Everyone thinks that, don't they? Severus Snape, the sarcastic bastard, vicious bastard, unfeeling bastard, every kind of bastard you could imagine, but never one capable of feeling hurt. Oh, don't worry about tormenting Severus, he's hard, he can take it. Never mind that maybe he has feelings too, that maybe the very reason he's so malevolent is to keep you too far away to hurt him." Severus finished his second glass of brandy, before pouring another and staring into the fire, as if scared to look anywhere else. "Luella, have you ever been in love?"

Luella briefly debated whether to be truthful or not, but then decided that discretion was the wisest choice, particularly given that the object of her affections was sitting in front of her. "No, sir."

"No, I suppose not. I keep forgetting how young you really are, you seem so much older sometimes. Well, here's some advice for you." he said, staring fixedly at the flames, pausing only to take a few more sips of brandy. "Steer clear of anyone with more troubles than you. Don't fall for that woundedness and hurt that some call vulnerability but which I prefer to think of as just plain traumatised. Don't think you'll be able to heal them. You won't. Let the wounded heal each other. Let them fight with and abuse each other, let them nightly commit crimes against humanity in the name of love. They deserve each other. You don't. Keep your innocence, Luella. I'd like to save you, if I can. Save you from ending up like me. Ending up like this." He shuddered, wincing as if to shut out some deep pain. Closing his eyes, he took another desperate gulp of brandy, aching for the release it could bring.

"Professor..." Luella whispered. Severus silenced her with a gesture.

"Don't waste your pity on me. I'm not worth it. I'm not worth your sympathy, not worth your kindness. You are far too innocent to be burdened with my problems, and the only reason I didn't snarl at you to get back to bed immediately before I gave you detention was because right now I'm too needy and weak-willed to want to do the right thing, and getting far too drunk to care. Because I'm a selfish bastard who wants some company, any company. I've been lonely for a long time, and I don't think I've ever been happy. That was never my lot in life as a child, and I've certainly not done anything in my adult life to merit something so rewarding. Quite the reverse." He turned to look at her, subjecting her to a scrutiny almost hungry in its intensity. "I envy you, Luella. I really do. You're young, you're carefree, your childhood has, from what I've heard, been one where you've been indulged and loved, and you have been happy. Keep it that way. Hold on to your innocence, Luella. Because once it's gone, it's gone forever."

Luella felt herself beginning to blush. "I can't stay single forever, sir."

"I didn't mean that." Severus said, brandishing his glass with an air of irritation. "You could be married for years, maybe several times over, or have a different lover every week, and still be innocent. I'm talking about a faith in the justice of life, a certain trust that everything will turn out right, that there's always a happy ending and that the world is a friendly place with your best interests at heart. A feeling that you will always be protected and provided for, somehow. You've got it. Few of your housemates have, although oddly enough, Miss Lovegood also has it in her own mischievous way. I've never had it. Caitlin used to have it, but hasn't done since Deanna was conceived. And I'm not certain Deanna's ever had it either, although sometimes she shows flashes of it. Count yourself lucky, Luella. May you never lose it. It's a precious thing, the most precious thing you will ever own. And that's why I'm warning you to steer clear of those who don't have it, because if you become involved with them, hoping to heal them somehow, all that will happen is that they'll drag you down with them until you're as scarred as they are. Until you're one of them. That's what happened to Caitlin Tyler, you know. She had the misfortune to fall in love with someone who didn't know the first thing about real love, only death and betrayal, and

now look at her. Cruelty is second nature to her. Yes, she's kind and charming, but she is also ruthless, cold and deadly. And yet she was like you once. She was like you once." Severus's voice trailed off. He was staring into the fire again, but the hurt had subsided, to be replaced with a look of deep sorrow, intermingled with a firm seasoning of regret. Shivering, he took another long swig of brandy, emptying the glass.

Luella felt her heart go out to him. Poor man, he looks so sad, Luella thought. What did happen to you? And then a sudden realisation occurred to her. Caitlin Tyler, once a carefree young innocent, but who fell in love with the wrong person and got turned into a psychopathic killer as a result. It slowly began to dawn on her who that wrong person must have been. And with that piece of information in place, her suspicions about his past crystallised into cold, hard certainty.

"It's you." she whispered. "She was in love with you, wasn't she?"

Severus didn't reply. Slowly, he lifted his eyes to meet hers. And the emotions she read there killed off any remaining doubts.

"Yes she was, the poor, deluded fool. And like every other woman who's ever made the mistake of loving me, she suffered horribly as a result. More fool her for thinking I was worth her affections. And more fool me for not realising I returned them until it was far too late." He hung his head in shame, silently pouring himself another brandy.

"You're Deanna's father, aren't you?" Luella said tonelessly. Severus nodded once.

"She must never know." he said, sadness suddenly giving way to urgent desperation. "Luella, promise me now that you will not tell her. The truth would destroy her. She must not, cannot, ever know that I am her father."

"She won't hear it from me." Luella said, her mind racing back to that conversation with Deanna outside Gringotts. "No, I won't tell her." Other implications, hot on the heels of that admission, were now forcing themselves on her. "You were a Death Eater, weren't you?"

"Not something I'm proud of, believe me. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it was the worst mistake of my life. I did eventually realise the error of my ways and change sides, but by then it was too late. Too late for Caitlin, anyway." Severus fell silent, letting Luella fill in the gaps for herself.

"Dear god." she whispered, her mind reeling. "I knew you'd had a rough time, but I didn't know... Why are you telling me all this!" she snarled, eyes blazing. "Why the hell do you think I need to know this! Couldn't you have just left me wondering? Couldn't you have let me nurse my suspicions in private? Why on earth did you have to drag me in here, sit me down and proceed to tell me more than I ever wanted to know about my best friend's mother and what a rotten time she's had! Why did you have to tell me more than I ever wished to know about you?" Her voice died to a whisper.

Severus looked away guiltily. "I'm sorry, Luella." he began, fumbling for the right words. "I just had to talk to someone and... Forgive me, this was wrong from the start. I should never have let it get this far. You'd better go."

Luella was not won over. "You had just better hope and pray to every god you believe in and all the ones that you don't, that Deanna never finds out." she said scathingly, her voice trembling, but the anger still very much there. "Because if she ever does, there will be hell to pay. Do you have any idea what she thinks of you?"

"No, what does she think of me?" Severus asked, curious.

"She thinks the world of you. She thinks you are the most perfect man on the planet. You are her role model, her mentor, the light of her life and she absolutely adores you. In her eyes, you can do no wrong. Do you know, she actually said to me that she wished you'd married her mother when she was young? Reckons she'd loved to have had you around growing up. Says she could spend hours in your company, just talking with you. I very much doubt you'll get her to admit it, but she loves you. She really does."

"She does?" Severus's eyes lit up, and the pain seemed to vanish. "Really? I mean, she really said all that about... about me?" The bitterness lifted, and for the first time, Luella saw her Potions master smile, really smile. A genuine, rarely seen smile that transfigured him into some kind of angel, a beaten, fallen angel, but an angel nonetheless.

"Don't get too happy." Luella said. "She would be devastated if she knew the truth." However, her anger abated as she felt her heart melting at the sight of that smile. "Well, she won't hear it from me. I don't want to see her hurt." She gazed at him, the memory of that smile completely displacing any lingering rage. I wish he could be that happy all the time, she thought. Poor thing, all he wants is to be loved. He must be so lonely. Luella watched him sitting there, brutalised but still so very attractive. She found herself overcome by this insane desire to hold him, to whisper words of comfort into his ear, to banish his inner demons and heal him, give him the love he was so obviously crying out for.

She shook her head. Insane, absolutely insane. No chance of him ever returning her feelings. And yet she couldn't leave him like this. An idea began to take shape, fuelled by the memory of another occasion in this same room only last year, a cut on her face, blood on her hands, Professor Snape healing her with a word. I might not be able to give you the love you need, but I can sure as hell heal you, she thought.

Getting up and drawing her wand, she walked over to him and perched herself on the arm of his chair. Severus drew back in surprise.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, girl?" he snapped at her.

"Healing you." Luella said simply. "Now shut up and let me get on with it."

Severus could only watch in amazement as Luella touched her wand to each wound in turn, healing them with a word. She worked slowly but methodically, turning his head

this way and that with a tenderness Severus hadn't been shown for a very long time. He found himself unable to take his eyes off her, those cool silvery eyes seeming to penetrate to the very core of his being. All he could think was, she knows. She knows and yet she's healing me. Is there nothing she can't see? And is there no one she can't show kindness to? He found himself wondering how on earth she ended up in Slytherin, before dismissing that thought in an instant. Just because she's compassionate doesn't mean she's weak, he reminded himself. Rather, ask what Slytherin did to deserve her. Hope began to blossom in the unpromising ground of Severus Snape's heart. Could it be that he wasn't so unworthy after all? The thought thrilled him even as his rational mind told him not to be so foolish.

At length, Luella finished and put her wand away. "There." she said with satisfaction. "Your looks are restored."

"Shame. I don't suppose you could have taken the opportunity to improve them while you were at it?" Severus asked lazily.

Luella giggled nervously. "I'm not that good."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "I'm not sure how to take that. In light of the fact that I happen to think quite highly of you, I shall choose to think of it as modesty on your part as opposed to sarcasm."

"Thank you, sir." Luella murmured, blushing. For a moment, they said nothing to each other, just looked into each others' eyes. Again, Severus felt a sudden surge of joy. She knows, she knows, and she doesn't find me completely repulsive! He felt the urge to sweep her into his arms and hold on for dear life, weeping tears of joy on her shoulder, professing the gratitude he felt using every single word he'd ever heard. However, he reined himself in.

"I believe I should be thanking you." he said quietly.

"Why?" Luella asked in surprise.

"Healing me. Putting up with the inane drunken ramblings of an embittered old man. Not running in disgust. Thank you."

Luella blushed, looking away in shyness. "Well, it was nothing really. I mean, you just looked so, well, sad. I couldn't stay angry at you for long."

"Well, I'm very grateful." Reaching out as if in a trance, he began idly tracing his fingertips along the line of her jaw. "Slytherin Redeemer, you have truly earned that title now. You healed more than my body tonight."

"Professor." Luella began. Severus immediately snapped back to full consciousness and realised what he was doing. He jerked his hand back immediately.

"Forgive me." he said, suddenly as embarrassed as she'd been. "I don't know what possessed me. You had better go, Luella. I've detained you for long enough."

Luella slipped reluctantly off the chair. It seemed that their moment of intimacy was at an end. She knew better than to think that it would ever be mentioned again, let alone repeated. In the morning, they'd return to being teacher and student, and life would carry on as it had done before. Luella almost laughed. As it had done before? Two new secrets to nurture - that Professor Snape had once been a Death Eater who'd raped Caitlin Tyler and fathered her child, and another, with an even more deadly potential. She was in love with him. No sense denying it now. How could she? Seeing him so defenceless, so vulnerable, so... open. It had taken all her self-control not fling her arms round him and kiss him there and then. And now it was all over and he was sending her away. In the morning, the boundaries would be firmly re-established, and she doubted they'd ever get that close again. I don't want this to end, I don't want to leave you, I love you, please... The words trailed off, unspoken.

He wasn't watching her now, just staring fiercely into the flames.

"Professor," she began. "Are you, I mean, will we..." She fought to find words that would leave the connection open without revealing her true feelings. "Are you sure you'll be OK? I mean, what happened to you tonight? You never did tell me."

She saw him freeze momentarily, pain flashing across his face again. "I don't want to talk about it." he said, with a firmness that forestalled any further questioning.
"However, let's just say that the debt of fifteen years ago has been repaid in full."

The debt of fifteen years ago had been repaid in full. The phrase continued to haunt her the following day as she tried to puzzle out what he could have meant. The debt of fifteen years ago. Owed to who? And how had they exacted repayment? She didn't really want to think about it, especially if it had involved the injuries she'd healed. Whatever it was, it must have been pretty awful. The look in his eyes had said more than words ever could, as if he'd been deeply wounded, deeply betrayed. She recalled the words she'd heard him saying, unaware of her presence. "You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?", followed by a mirthless laugh. She couldn't imagine what they meant though, or who had said them to him originally. The only person she could ever imagine him calling love, though, was Deanna's mother, which opened up a whole host of possibilities that she really didn't want to think about. She was certainly capable of inflicting wounds like that on him, and he certainly owed her a pretty big debt. A debt that was fifteen years in the making... Dear god, what had Caitlin Tyler done to him?

"What's up, Lu?" Deanna asked cheerily. "You look like you're in a little world of your own there."

Luella shook herself. "It's nothing. I'm just thinking."

"You're always thinking. Start interacting with the rest of the world for a change!"

"Nothing wrong with thinking." Rianne said. "Our Lu's got a deep mind. You leave her alone."

"Well, you've been away with the fairies a lot more than usual today. What's on your mind, Lu?" Deanna asked curiously.

"Nothing. Just things. Look, I'm going to the dorm. Catch you lot later." Luella got up and headed out. The last thing she wanted to do was confide in Deanna. Now that Deanna had decided she actually liked Snape, Luella really didn't want to worry her. Especially if her mother was involved somehow.

Deanna watched her go and turned to Rianne. "Someone talk to me, please. I'm bored! What are you up to, Ri?"

Rianne was playing with Marlie's Game Boy, staring intently at the screen with a look of deep concentration on her face, her thumbs skilfully manipulating the controls.

"Don't distract me, I'm at a crucial stage."

"Tetris, I suppose." said Deanna, peering over her friend's shoulder. "Ri, I thought you said you couldn't see the point of it? Didn't you say that it was a frivolous waste of time? One of Marlie's pointless Muggle toys, you said."

"That's right." said Rianne, expertly flicking a block into a perfectly formed gap. "But this particular game requires a lot of skill. It demands an eye for detail and good reflexes, all of which are useful attributes to have. It's very tricky. Now stop distracting me, I'm on Level Six and looking to beat my high score."

Deanna watched the game over her shoulder. "It's awfully fast, isn't it?"

"Yes, Tyler, that is the bloody point." said Rianne, becoming increasingly more irritable. "How are you meant to increase the difficulty level otherwise?"

"Hey, there's another one of them l-shaped blocks on its way down. Spin it round a few times, it'll go nicely in that space on the left - ah." Rianne, distracted, had accidentally sent the block in the wrong direction entirely, and the screen was reading "Game Over". Deanna hastily backed away as Rianne turned slowly to look at her, the fury in her eyes saying more than words ever could.

"Tyler. Go away." she said, each word complete with its very own ice cap.

"Sorry, Ri." Deanna muttered, swiftly leaving Rianne cursing as she entered her name in to the high score table and started another game. Deciding to seek entertainment from a safer source, she turned to Marlie, who was staring moodily across the room at the Slytherin Quidditch team. Her erstwhile teammates were busy showing off new brooms and chatting about a new Seeker. Not that Marlie had really been paying much attention. She was too busy watching them all and picturing what could have been, what once had been. She started as Deanna nudged her elbow.

"What?" she asked in surprise.

"Good lord, not another one!" Deanna sighed, throwing up her hands in frustration.
"Marlie, snap out of it, girlie. What's up with you anyway?"

"If you have to ask, Tyler..." Marlie sighed.

"She's depressed about not being on the team this year." Rianne said lazily, her eyes not leaving the console. "That's why she's been staring at them for the past half hour. At least, I hope it is. The alternative is that she's got a crush on Marcus Flint and that's just too awful to contemplate."

"That's rich, coming from you." snapped Marlie.

"Old joke, Lovegood." Rianne said calmly. "Marls, just accept that you're not on the team, get over it and start planning your comeback. It's the Slytherin thing to do."

"Easy for you to say!" Marlie said. "I'm upset! Let me be depressed in peace, you two."

Rianne turned to Deanna. "Feelings, eh? Always screwing up your life when you most need to be rational. They're a dead loss, I'm telling you. Keep them under control, or they'll screw your life up something chronic."

"Easy for you to say." Deanna said quietly. "Mine are a pain in the arse to deal with." She glanced over at the team and noticed something that made her sit up. "Marls, has your brother got a new broom? Because that's no Cleansweep."

Marlie looked at her brother's broom closely for the first time, her face going pale. "That's a Nimbus Two Thousand and One!" she gasped. "They're really expensive, how on earth...? Mum and Dad never bought him one of those!" Getting up, she marched straight over to him. Mike Lovegood, in the middle of caressing his new broom, glanced up and immediately started to look rather nervous.

"Er, hi sis." he said, starting to blush. Marlie stood before him, hands on hips, a tower of fury.

"What, Mike Lovegood, is *that*?"

"It's a broom." he said, smiling just a bit too innocently.

"A broom." Marlie said quietly. "Whose? Yours?"

"Er..." Mike looked desperately at Kat and Summer, both of whom were giving him looks that said all too clearly "She's your sister, you deal with it."

"It might be." Mike said evasively.

"It might be." Marlie said quietly. "Michael, surely you know if you own a Nimbus Two Thousand and One or not? They're the best on the market, the very best, and they've only been out a month or so. If I had one, I think I'd know about it, don't you?"

"Mike, stop being such a coward, she's your little sister, not your mum." Kat said wearily. "Yes, Marlie, it's his."

"I see." Marlie said quietly. "So tell me brother. Where did you get the money to buy one of them? Because I don't recall Mum and Dad getting one for you!" Marlie's voice rose to a scream. Mike cowered behind his broom. "So what the hell are you doing with a top range broom like that???"

"Marlie, please, don't be cross." Mike said, trying to appease his furious sister. Marlie ignored him, looking at the rest of the team, suddenly realising that they too all had shiny new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones.

"You've all got them!" she shouted. "What the hell did you do, ramraid a broom shop or something?"

Mike said something that sounded like "meep".

"Er, we got given them." Kat said, giving her most charming, yet somehow strangely guilty, smile.

"A donation for the team, like." Summer added helpfully.

"Who from?" Marlie fumed. "Nimbus sponsoring you or something?"

"Not exactly." Flint said languidly. Marlie fell quiet, a horrible feeling of foreboding sneaking up her spine.

"What do you mean?" she asked. Flint just grinned nastily.

"Our new Seeker got them for us, as a thank you for picking him." he said, grinning horribly. "A little goodwill present."

"Your new Seeker bought you all new brooms?" Marlie whispered. "But that must have cost a fortune, who on earth's rich enough to do that?" Her voice trailed off as the realisation hit her. There was only one person in Slytherin with parents rich enough to buy seven new Nimbuses, and the inclination to do it. Slowly, she turned around, her eyes picking out her cousin, Draco Malfoy. One look at him confirmed it. He was grinning even more than Flint.

"Hey, cous." he said gleefully. "I'm on the team. Going to congratulate me?"

Marlie shook her head in disbelief. "They did not choose you." she said, stunned.

"They did. As of yesterday, I'm official Slytherin Seeker." Draco grinned. "But I'll let you run my fan club if you like. You'd make a good cheerleader, you know."

"Shut up." Marlie hissed in fury. Shaking her hair out, she drew herself up to her full height and gave him her most imperious look. "Well, congratulations, cousin." she said coldly. "I hope you make a good Seeker. But I see it took you a year to do it. And I never needed bribery either." With that, she turned and walked out, head held high, eyes blazing. It was only in the privacy of the corridor leading to her dorm that she folded her arms around herself and hastily blinked back the tears.

It was in that frame of mind that Marlie stormed back into the dorm and flung herself down on her bed. Snowy immediately leapt into his mistress's lap, mewing in an attempt to console her.

On the opposite bed, Luella glanced up. "Something the matter, Marlie?"

"They've got a new Seeker." Marlie said sulkily, cuddling her cat for all she was worth.

"Who?" Luella asked.

Marlie buried her face in Snowy's luxuriant fur. "Malfoy." she said, choking. "They picked Malfoy." She began sobbing. "They preferred Malfoy to me. All because his father bought the entire team some nice, shiny new brooms! Bastards!" she wept. "Bastards, bastards, bastards. I mean, I can believe Flint would do it. But what about the rest of the team? I thought they liked me! I can't believe they could just stand back and let that git buy his way on to the team. I mean, my own brother!" She put Snowy down and brushed away the tears, turning to look at Luella. "Do I mean that little to them?" she whispered. "After three years as a team, they chuck me over for him. Well, I hope they're happy with themselves! I hope they never win a game without me."

"You don't mean that." Luella said quietly.

"I bloody do, Lu." Marlie said fiercely. "If there's any justice in the world at all, they won't see that Quidditch Cup with green and silver ribbons on it again until I'm back on the team in some way. You'll see! The day will come when they'll come crawling back to me begging me to join the team again."

"Don't tell me." Luella sighed. "You'll then take great pleasure in telling them where they can stick their Quidditch and watch them squirm."

"Hardly." Marlie said, grinning. "I mean, I'd leave them hanging on for a bit, obviously. But I'd graciously and magnanimously accept in the end, as a favour to them because I'm nice like that."

"And you wouldn't lord it over them at all, would you?" Luella said, beginning to grin herself.

"Me?" Marlie said in wide-eyed innocence. "My dear Luella, I can't even begin to imagine where you'd get the idea that *I* would ever do a thing like that."

Luella laughed. "Marls, you'd throw your weight around at every single opportunity, you big prima donna, you." She smiled gently at her giggling friend. "So you've cheered up then."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." Marlie said reflectively. "But I'll get over it. And I WILL get back on that team somehow. I don't know how yet, but I will. And I tell you this. Slytherin reserves aren't going to lose a game all season. Not with me leading them."

Marlie said, eyes burning bright. She turned to look at Luella again, her face softening. "So. Luie. What's up with you? And don't tell me nothing's wrong. You've spent all day staring moodily into space with this weird look on your face. What's on your mind, mate?"

Luella sighed. Should she tell her? She wasn't sure whether Marlie would make a good confidant or not. And yet, she did need to talk to someone and there wasn't really anyone else.

"All right. It's Professor Snape." she said wearily.

"What?" Marlie shrieked. "Lu, you don't fancy him, do you? Dear gods, not you as well. It's bad enough with Rianne. Even Deanna seems to have fallen under his spell. What is it with him?"

"Two words, Marlie. Gilderoy and Lockhart." Luella said warningly. Marlie shut up immediately. Luella grinned and continued. "No, it's not that. I'm worried about him, Marls."

"Worried?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "Why? I mean, he's a teacher. It's not our job to worry about teachers. Come on, Lu, he's thirty eight. Old enough to look after himself by now."

"Yeah?" Luella laughed hollowly. "Didn't seem that way last night."

"Last night?" Marlie was intrigued now. Settling into a comfortable gossiping position, she leaned forward, all ears. "What happened last night? Is it saucy?"

"Marlie, this is in the strictest confidence. I don't want this going round school, understand? Not a word to anyone else here, OK?"

"Promise."

"Good." said Luella firmly. "Because if I hear any rumours about this, I will use Glamoury to make you think the Slytherin Serpent is following you everywhere trying to suck out your brains. Got it?"

"OK, OK." Marlie said, shivering. "Not a word. You got me. Damn, you're evil sometimes."

"I like to think so." Luella replied coolly. Getting up, she walked over to Marlie's bed, curling up with one of her friend's purple heart-shaped cushions held close against her, and gazing distantly into space as she recalled the events of the previous night.

"I had a nightmare."

Marlie froze. Luella hardly ever had bad dreams, but the last time she had, it had not been good news.

"Lu. Oh Lu. It's not..." Marlie hesitated. Although unlike most mages, she was quite capable of saying the name, it didn't mean she didn't fear it. "It's not him, is it? You know, Voldemort."

Luella shook her head. "No. This was different. Someone I knew was being hurt, was in trouble. I was trying to find them but I couldn't. Woke up and knew it was no dream. Someone really was in trouble. I checked on you lot first, but you were fine."

"Nice of you." said Marlie. She paused. "How do I look when I'm sleeping?" she asked, curious. "Do I look incredibly glamourous and sexy?"

"Marlie, you look like some beautiful nymph straight off Mount Olympus itself. A picture of youth and beauty, marred only by your snoring."

"What?" shrieked Marlie. "Snoring?? I do not snore!" Another pause. "I don't, do I?"

"Not very loudly." said Luella. This did not comfort Marlie in the slightest.

"Snoring! Oh gods..." she moaned. She sat up, putting self-pity behind her. "Right. That does it. I shall have to ask Rianne to do me an Anti-Snoring Potion of some kind. I am not going to be known as the Girl Who Snored for the rest of my life. I am the Slytherin Sex Kitten, I can't possibly snore!"

"Marlie, grow up." said Luella, getting a little annoyed. "Anyway, do you or do you not want to hear about what happened last night?"

Marlie immediately returned her attention back to her friend. "Of course. So, you had a bad dream, were still scared that someone was in trouble, but checked on us and we were fine. Then what?"

"Sat down and thought. I could still sense that someone out there needed me. Then it hit me. I needed to find Professor Snape. So I went to his office. I was going to ask for a Sleeping Potion, tell him I'd been having nightmares again. At worst, I'd have got a decent night's sleep out of it. He wasn't in though."

"Not in?" said Marlie, raising an eyebrow. She began to grin slyly. "Not in his bedroom in the early hours of the morning, eh? So what was he up to? Out drinking? Don't tell me he's got a lady friend!" Marlie was barely able to contain herself, her mood having picked up considerably. "Snapey's got a girlfriend! Oh, wait until I tell Tyler..."

"Marlie! I'm warning you, Slytherin Serpent trying to suck your brains out. Don't make me do it." warned Luella threateningly. "No, I'm sure he doesn't. I'm sure he wasn't out on a romantic date anyway. I was about to give up and go back to bed when he turned up. He looked like he'd been in a fight, Marlie. You should have seen him, blood everywhere, bruised, all hunched up and quiet, like he just didn't want to face anyone. He didn't see me at first, just went straight to his office and opened the door, saying..." She paused, remembering the phrase as if she'd heard it only moments ago. "He said 'You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?'" Luella shivered. "I dropped the glamour and spoke to him. He tried to get rid of me at first,

but I refused to go. More fool me." She laughed bitterly. "Should have gone to bed while I had the chance. Anyway, something in him just seemed to give, as if he couldn't bear to be alone any more. He showed me into his office, and we talked."

Marlie's eyes widened. "You were in his office? In the early hours of the morning? On your own? Oh my... Lu, what's going on? What have you got yourself mixed up in? You're not... you know... are you?"

"No!" Luella snapped. "He's a teacher, as if I would. Listen, it was him I was dreaming about. Something happened to him, Marlie. Something really bad. He didn't just get himself beaten up, something more happened. And I think..." she hesitated. "I think it was done by someone he cared about."

"Someone he cares about?" Marlie asked. "Blimey, Lu, I didn't know there was such a person."

"Well there is." Luella said softly. "He's got feelings too, and they were hurt big time. He refused to tell me what had happened to him, just kept giving me all this advice about holding on to my innocence while I could, not getting involved with anyone with more problems than me, and generally not screwing my life up. He said he didn't want me to end up like him. He looked so afraid, so miserable, so frightened. I just couldn't take it. In the end, I got up and healed the wounds on him, which is why no one's noticed anything. He seemed really grateful, like he couldn't believe anyone could be that kind to him. He still wouldn't tell me what happened, he said I didn't deserve to be burdened with his problems. But he did thank me. Said I'd truly earned my Slytherin Redeemer title now."

Marlie was staring at her in amazement. "He said all that to you? Blimey. Lu, are you sure you know what you're getting yourself into?"

"No." she whispered. "No, I'm not sure at all! I am so scared for him, Marlie. And scared for me too! He's meant to be protecting me, training me up to be the Redeemer. Seeing him like that, though... He was nothing like he normally is in class. It was like all his usual defences were down, that whatever had happened to him was so bad that he just couldn't hide it. You didn't see the look in his eyes. He looked so hurt, so betrayed. Like a zombie." Luella hunched herself up tightly. "I'm frightened, Marls. So very, very frightened. I used to think he was so strong, could protect me from anything. That if Lord Voldie came calling, he would protect me, or failing that, whatever he'd taught me would. He was my mentor, my real Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Now, I just don't know. How is he supposed to protect me if he can't protect himself?" Luella said, her voice trembling.

Marlie let Snowy jump off her and reached out to cuddle her friend. "Lu, don't. You don't know what happened. It's not your problem. He was right, you know, it's not your responsibility. Try not to let it get to you, mate. He's tough. He'll survive. Didn't you say once that he'd been there, seen it, done it in the last war? Well then, he must have suffered worse. He'll recover."

"I hope so." Luella sighed. "I really do." She huddled up in a ball, drawing closer to Marlie for comfort. "Because I need him, Marls. I do. I can't fight Voldie without him.

Him and Caitlin, they're my mentors. They're like a second set of parents to me. I'm not going to make it without them, I need them both so badly, I hate it when they're at each other's throats." Her voice trailed off.

Marlie stared in shock. Even she could piece it together from these clues. "Lu, you're not saying... I mean, you don't think... Surely not? Deanna's mum? Did that to him? But why?"

"I don't know." said Luella. "But she's more than capable of lashing out if he said something untoward. I don't know, I just have this horrible feeling... Listen, Marls, you won't tell anyone, will you? I mean, I don't want the entire school knowing, and I definitely don't want Deanna finding out. Promise me!"

"OK, I promise. No one here at school's going to know." said Marlie, her mind running wild.

"Thanks, Marls. I appreciate it." said Luella, smiling. Marlie hugged her friend. However, her smile faded as she stared into space, looking over Luella's shoulder.

That night found Marlie sitting in the corner of the common room, long after everyone else had gone to bed, quill in hand, writing a letter home to her mother. Of course she had promised Luella not to spread it around school. But she could hardly let this drop, could she? Not when Lu was so upset. I'm not interfering, she told herself. I'm not! Just that my mum knows them both, and if they've got some kind of grudge against each other, she's best placed to sort it out.

Marlie sealed her letter in its envelope, addressed it, and fixed it on to the claw Nestra was obligingly holding out for her. The falcon seemed to sense that this was no ordinary letter home, and co-operated perfectly. A good thing too, as Marlie hadn't actually asked Deanna if she could borrow the bird. She just hoped Deanna wouldn't need her in the next few days.

Nestra took off and disappeared up one of the air-vents that connected the Slytherin common room with the outside world. Marlie watched her go, a look of satisfaction on her face. Turning away, she realised that she wasn't alone after all. Ginny was curled up on an inflatable chair in another corner, scribbling something in a small leather book.

"Hey, Gin." Marlie called out cheerfully, getting up and wandering over to her young protegee. "How's tricks? You settling in OK?"

"Not bad." said Ginny, smiling weakly. "I mean, everyone here's being nice enough, really friendly. Even Malfoy's not as bad as everyone says he is. Lydia and Autumn are cool too. And the work's pretty straightforward really. Even Professor Snape's not too awful."

"Good, I'm glad to hear it." said Marlie, relieved. "What's that you got there, Gin?" She indicated the book in Ginny's lap.

Ginny immediately became defensive. "Nothing," she said hastily.

"Nothing?" said Marlie. "Come on, Gin, you can tell me. What is it?" She reached for the book. Ginny snatched it out of reach.

"No!" she cried. Marlie jumped back in surprise.

"All right, all right, I was just asking," she said. "Anyway, I'm going to bed. See you in the morning, Gin." And with that, Marlie left. She had far too much on her mind to worry about Ginny's personal belongings.

By contrast, Ginny was never far from Ron's mind, even though he was refusing to acknowledge her existence. It was now the third day of term, and Hermione and Harry were still waiting for Ron to get over the shock. The two of them were waiting outside Snape's classroom for their first Potions lesson of the year to start. Some of the other Gryffindors were there, but of Ron there was no sign.

Hermione wasted no time in getting to the point.

"How's Ron?" she asked Harry.

"Not good. Still bitter. Only been a few days though, Mione. Give him time."

Hermione tutted in irritation. "He is being such a prat about this, Harry. I mean, OK, so she's a Slytherin. What is his problem? Anyone would think she'd turned into a You-Know-Who supporter from the way he's been acting."

"Give him a break, Herm. She's his only sister and closest to him in age. They were very close. And you know what he's like about Slytherins."

"What's so bad about Slytherins?" Hermione asked. "I mean, I know Malfoy's a bit of a git, and Snape's not exactly charming, but even so, most of them are all right. Marlie's fun to hang around with, Rianne's not so bad when you get to know her, Deanna's cool as long as you don't annoy her, and Lu's the sweetest person I know. They're Slytherins too! Why Ron has to overreact all the time is beyond me. Honestly, he is so prejudiced." Hermione folded her arms, her face set in what Harry and Ron referred to as her McGonagall look.

Harry nudged her as Ron walked in. "Get smiling, he's here."

Both of them fell silent as he approached, looking more miserable than he'd done yet.

"Hi, Ron," said Hermione, smiling brightly.

"How are you feeling?" asked Harry, concerned.

"I've felt better," said Ron faintly. He stood next to them, dejected. "Heard from Mum and Dad today. Percy told them."

Harry and Hermione looked at each other and sighed.

"What did they say?" asked Hermione gently.

"Not much." said Ron, a lump in his throat. "They were polite about it, nice enough. Said that if that was where she'd be happiest then it was all for the best, to remember that she was still our sister and not to treat her any differently." He shook his head, swallowing hard. "How can they take it so well?" he demanded, punching his hand. "How can they just sit there and accept it, their only daughter being in Slytherin? How can they tell us not to treat her any differently, to see her as a sister when she's..." He swallowed before continuing. "When she's one of *them*?"

Hermione gently hugged Ron, exchanging concerned looks with Harry.

"But they do have a point, Ron." she said softly. "I mean, if it's where she'll be happiest, it's for the best, right? She's still your sister, you know. And not all Slytherins are bad. Lu's a lovely girl and she's a Slytherin."

"She's not my sister." said Ron firmly. "It's different. That lot are different. They're proper Slytherins, they've always been Slytherins. Ginny's a Gryffindor." His voice lowered. "I thought she was a Gryffindor."

"She's still Ginny, though." said Harry. "She's not a different person just because she's a Slyth."

Ron raised his eyes to meet his. Harry flinched away. "Exactly." Ron said quietly. "My point exactly, Harry."

"Weasley!" came a gloating voice, all false friendliness and too-smooth charm. Draco.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" said Harry, gritting his teeth.

"Want? Well, I wanted a word with Weasley here. I noticed that he's not seen much of his charming little sister recently and I thought I'd update him on how she was settling in." Draco flashed his teeth at them.

"You stay the hell away from my sister, Malfoy." snarled Ron.

Behind Draco, Crabbe and Goyle snickered. Draco himself just smiled even more. "Why on earth would I want to do that? She's such a friendly, outgoing personality, we all adore her. The life and soul of the Slytherin common room. She'll be giving Marlie Lovegood a run for her money in a few years time, you just wait."

"My sister is nothing like Marlie Lovegood!" yelled Ron, going crimson. "My sister's not a tart like her!"

"No, I suppose you're right." mused Draco. "She's not my cousin either." The grin returned, driven by pure malice. "You know, she is quite attractive. I could quite fancy her myself when she's a bit older. Yes, I can quite see her as Ginny Malfoy. What do you think, Weasley? Fancy having me as a brother-in-law?"

Ron's control snapped. Before Hermione or Harry could stop him, he threw himself at Malfoy, slamming the Slytherin up against the wall.

"If you so much as look at my sister, Malfoy, I swear I will punch your friggin' lights out!" he hissed at him.

"I'd like to see you try!" Draco laughed harshly. Crabbe and Goyle drew their wands and advanced. Then fell back instantly. Ron felt Hermione and Harry grabbing at his sleeves.

"Ron, Snape!" Harry hissed. Ron immediately let Draco go and stepped back. Too late.

Snape advanced on them, his eyes blazing. "And what exactly is going on here?" he said, in a soft voice that fooled none of them.

"Nothing." said Ron automatically.

"Weasley was attacking me, sir." said Draco in his usual fawning voice. "I just asked after his sister and he went for me."

Harry curled his fingers around his wand, fully expecting Snape to turn on Ron, and dish out detention, seasoned with a generous helping of sarcasm. However, Snape did nothing of the sort. His usual snide cynicism seemed to waver, and Harry, for the first time ever, saw something approaching weariness in his teacher's eyes. In fact, although he couldn't have sworn to it, there was something not a million miles away from hurt. As if Snape just couldn't, didn't want to deal with this anymore.

When he did speak, it was in a flat, toneless voice that took emotionlessness and redefined it as an emotion in its own right.

"You both know that fighting is against the rules. Five points from each of you. Now get inside and behave." With that, he turned and walked in.

Ron blinked. "Harry," he said, "that was Snape, wasn't it? I wasn't hallucinating, was I?"

"No, that definitely looked like him." said Harry, as confused as Ron was. "What do you make of it, Mione?"

Hermione shook her head. "No idea. He sounded really hacked off though, as though he'd been having a really bad time and just couldn't be bothered to hide it anymore."

Draco was having as much difficulty believing it as the Gryffindors.

"Professor Snape... just took points... off me!" he said, still in a state of shock. He stared wildly at them. "What's happening?"

"Don't look at us, he's your House Head." said Hermione primly. "Maybe he's finally decided to act fairly and impartially for once."

"WHAT?" shrieked all the Slytherins.

"He can't!" screeched Pansy Parkinson. "How are we going to win the Cup if he starts playing fair!"

"My heart bleeds for you." said Harry. "You'll have to earn your points fair and square for once."

"What, you mean... without cheating?" Draco looked horrified. "How?"

"That, Malfoy, is your problem." said Harry, beginning to grin. "Come on, let's not keep the newly reformed and fair-minded Snape waiting." He went in, Hermione and Ron following.

Draco spun round to face his fellow Slytherins. "This is not good news. Any ideas, folks?"

Crabbe and Goyle said nothing, looking bemused. Blaise Zabini, one of Pansy Parkinson's little gang, was first to speak.

"I suppose" she said timidly, "we could try playing fair, like what Potter said." She took in the looks her fellow Slytherins were giving her. "Or perhaps not."

"Playing fair," said Pansy imperiously, "is not the Slytherin way."

"Let's face it, if we can't cheat, we're done for." sighed Millicent Bulstrode, Pansy's other girl-chum. "What do we do, Draco? He's always liked you. Maybe you can have a word with him."

"I don't think so." said Draco. "Not given that I'm the one who just got points taken off. He'll guess something's up. No, there's only two people who've got enough influence with Snapey to find out what the hell's going on, and the ability to do it discreetly." Draco's features contorted in pain as he realised what he was going to have to do. "We're going to have to ask Tyler and Martin."

Chapter Six Confrontations, Recriminations and Negotiations

Evening in the Serpents' Nest and the Slytherin Four were quietly going about their own business, Rianne by now thoroughly addicted to Marlie's customised Nintendo, Marlie busying herself with some obscure Transfiguration tome, Luella studying her Tarot cards, and Deanna listening to Nirvana on the Walkmage while getting on with her Charms homework, when Luella's attention was caught by a whispered conversation nearby. She recognised the voices as those of Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy.

"Why do I have to ask her?" Draco was demanding. "She hates me, they all do."

"Exactly." replied Pansy. "You're the one with the strongest emotional connection there. They're more likely to do it if only to take the opportunity to have you in their debt."

"Bloody hell, Pansy. They're going to humiliate me, you know what they're like."

"Should have thought of that before you decided to make yourself their outright enemy, shouldn't you? Anyway, shut up, they've noticed us."

Luella was watching them casually, intrigued.

"Let's see." she said. "We've got the Fool crossed by Death, in between the Hermit inverted and the Devil, which can only mean one thing. I'm about to get bothered. What do you two want?"

Rianne paused her game and looked up. Her immediate reaction was to give Deanna a nudge.

"Wake up, Tyler, we've got company."

Deanna immediately removed her headphones and laid down her book, reaching for her wand.

"No need to get all defensive, Tyler." sneered Draco.

"Draco! Be nice!" hissed Pansy. "We need to keep her sweet."

"I know, I know." said Draco, irritably. He turned back to Deanna, his scowl changing into a smile.

"Tyler." he said sweetly. "We were wondering if perhaps you could help us out."

"Help you out." said Deanna. She glanced at her friends, all of whom were looking confused. She turned back to Draco. "Malfoy, ever since you started at this school, you have never lost the opportunity to abuse, tease, pick fights with and generally

harass me and my friends. So why on earth do you think I should be the slightest bit interested in helping you out?"

"Deanna, give him a break." said Rianne. "Think how hard it must be, after all the mutual loathing, for him to have to come and ask you for help and assistance. It must really take a dent out of his pride. Show some understanding, girlie."

"What are you saying, Ri?" asked Deanna, puzzled. "Are you saying I should be sympathetic and magnanimous towards his request?"

"No, Tyler, I'm telling you to milk it. Go on, mate, make him work for it!" Rianne was grinning in anticipation.

"Yeah, go on DT, make him suffer!" called Marlie.

"Cut it out!" snapped Luella. "Deanna, hear him out. It could be important."

"Very well." sighed Deanna. "Malfoy, what is it?"

"It's Snape." said Draco, pulling up a chair. "We're concerned about him."

Marlie and Luella both tensed immediately, but the attention being on Deanna, no one noticed.

"Worried how?" asked Marlie, exchanging looks with Luella.

"He's started taking points off Slytherin." said Pansy.

Deanna and Rianne gave each other puzzled looks. "What for?" asked Deanna.

Draco shifted uncomfortably. Deanna and Rianne continued to give him penetrating looks. Pansy, sensing the impasse, decided to intervene.

"Tell them, Draco." she said firmly. "Or I will."

"I was having a chat with Weasley." Draco muttered. "And, erm, things got a bit heated."

"Heated." said Rianne evenly. "I see."

"I wasn't taunting him or anything!" said Draco desperately. "I was just asking after Ginny and he went for me!"

"Just politely enquiring after her health, were you?" asked Deanna, her every word dripping sarcasm. "And he just lost it and went for you, did he? Of course. Should have guessed."

"Completely unprovoked attack! He just went mad all of a sudden!" protested Draco.

"Of course he did, Malfoy." said Luella, not even bothering to fake sincerity.

"You know, Malfoy, I sometimes wonder if even you can tell when you're lying any more." mused Rianne. "It's been so long since you told the truth, I'm amazed you can even remember what it is."

"Of course we can tell when he's lying." said Marlie irritably. "His lips are moving. So let me guess. Snape walked in on the fight and took points off you both."

"That's it!" nodded Draco.

"Well." said Rianne. "Fancy that. A teacher taking points off a student breaking the rules. Who would have thought it, eh Tyler?"

"Yeah, but this is Snape!" said Draco. "He's not meant to take points off us, is he? He's meant to overlook our failings, give us lots of points for no valid reason, and dock loads of points off everyone else! He can't start treating us fairly! We'll never win the Cup again!"

"He's got a point." said Marlie. "We're going to have our work cut out for us if we can't cheat any more."

"Maybe we don't want to win by cheating." said Deanna, beginning to grin. "Maybe we want to win fair and square for a change."

"WHAT?" Draco nearly screamed. "Playing fair? You can't. We can't! Playing fair is not the Slytherin way, damn it! We need to cheat! Tyler, please."

"Of course, I could be persuaded otherwise." said Deanna idly.

"How. I'll do anything." said Draco in desperation.

"Anything?" said Deanna, grinning.

"Anything."

Deanna leaned back in her chair, contemplating the possibilities. "All right. Say you're sorry for killing my original owl."

"I'm sorry for killing your original owl." muttered Draco. "Is that it?"

"Not yet. Tell Lu you're sorry for all the times you've called her a Mudblood."

Deanna watched in satisfaction as Draco's eyes flared with fury, before he controlled his anger and gave in.

"I'm sorry I called you a Mudblood, Martin."

"You're welcome, Malfoy. Don't do it again."

"There!" smiled Deanna. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"Is there anything else, Tyler?" said Draco through gritted teeth.

"Say 'Haverfordwest Horntails are the best Quidditch team ever and I only support Montrose Magpies because I'm a pathetic glory-hunting git.' "

"I will do no such thing..." Draco started to say before Pansy gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs.

"Just say it! We do need her help after all." she hissed.

Draco looked far from happy at this, but nevertheless muttered it hastily under his breath.

"Didn't hear you, Malfoy." said Deanna sweetly. "Louder, if you please."

"Go on." whispered Pansy. "Just get it over with."

Draco sighed and repeated the phrase in a voice loud enough for most of the common room to hear.

"Wonderful, Malfoy. Well done, we didn't know you had it in you." smiled Deanna. "Finally, there is the Slytherin Code of Honour, in particular, section four, paragraph three, which states that for all favours granted, a favour of equal value must be returned. You owe me. Remember that, Malfoy."

"All right." muttered Draco, heartily beginning to regret this. "Well, will you talk to him for us?"

"OK." Deanna nodded. She returned to her homework. "In the morning."

"In the morning?" said Draco frantically. "Can't you go tonight?"

Deanna turned to look at him, eyes glittering with cold. "I'm busy, Malfoy. I have work to do. Your request is not so urgent that it cannot wait until tomorrow, can it?"

"No, Tyler." said Draco.

"Good. In which case, I shall bid you good evening. Goodbye, Malfoy. Goodbye, Pansy." She returned to her work, the rest of the Slytherin Four following suit. Draco and Pansy walked away, Draco trying to ignore Crabbe and Goyle sniggering at him.

"Pansy, I've a good mind to make you owe me for getting me to do that." Draco snapped. "Bloody hellfire, how am I going to live this down?"

"You'll manage." said Pansy, unbothered. "She said yes, didn't she? What more do you want?"

"Having my pride back would be nice." said Draco sulkily. Meanwhile, many miles to the south, Melissa Lovegood, enjoying a night off for once, the DDAE in Caitlin's

capable hands, was relaxing with a glass of wine, feet up in front of Coronation Street, curled up with her husband Leonard.

The Owlery alarm going off did not disturb her in the slightest. "Get that, Sukey." she said lazily to the house-elf, who scurried off immediately.

"You don't think it'll be work, do you?" Leonard murmured into her ear. "If so, tell them you've died or moved, or something. I'm enjoying this far too much to let you go at the moment."

"It won't be, Caitlin's quite capable of dealing with any emergencies." smiled Melissa. "Probably one of the kids or something. Or junk mail."

Sukey returned with a letter in hand. "It is from Miss Marlie, Mrs. Lovegood."

"Told you." she sighed. "Probably for you, Len. Some obscure mechanical thing she needs. Honestly, such talent, and she wastes it on devising magically-powered lava lamps. I ask you."

"No, no, it's for you, Mrs. Lovegood." said Sukey, brandishing the letter at her.

"For me?" Melissa asked in surprise. Marlie's letters were usually addressed to both of them, unless she needed her father to get some spare parts for her. Melissa took the letter, exchanged a surprised look with her husband and opened it.

Curiosity swiftly turned to disbelief, as Melissa pushed Leonard away and sat up, reaching for her shoes.

"I have to go to Hogwarts. Now. Sorry, love." she said apologetically.

"Now?" he said in surprise. "Honestly, it's the first free evening you've had all week, and you're disappearing off up there? What's up? Marlie is all right, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's fine, they both are. This concerns Severus."

Leonard's concern changed swiftly to irritation. "Oh. Severus. Should have known. Who else do you drop everything and run to help at a minute's notice. Hang on, wait a second. Why is Marlie writing to you about Severus?"

"She's heard rumours." said Melissa. "Not very nice rumours. Concerning him and Caitlin. Apparently they had some kind of fight."

"What, Caitlin and Severus? Arguing? Surely not." Leonard's voice dripped sarcasm.

"More than arguing. Apparently it got physical."

"Physical? You mean he hit her? Good lord, Mel, is she all right?"

"Caitlin Tyler is an Auror and a very highly-trained one. Her natural response on being physically attacked is to fight back. This is our Unarmed Combat specialist

we're talking about here! Caitlin will be just fine. It's Sev I'm worried about." Melissa finished putting her shoes on and headed for the hallway to retrieve her cloak and broom. "I'd better go and see him, find out what happened and try and sort things out."

Leonard looked at her in amazement. "You are determined to set those two up if it kills you, aren't you?"

"Of course. Darling, they're perfect for each other. They need each other. I just need to convince them." Melissa pulled her cloak on and adjusted her clothes in the mirror, before brushing her hair into shape.

"Perfect for each other. Of course. That's why they're always screaming at each other and throwing stuff whenever they meet up. You know Mel, have you ever thought of taking up an easier and less demanding hobby? Sorting out the Northern Ireland peace process, for example. Or ending the Arab-Israeli conflict. Hell, if you can get Caitlin and Severus together, nothing's beyond your talents."

"Don't be silly darling, if I get involved in Muggle politics now, I'll have nothing to do when I'm retired." said Melissa absently. "Right, I shouldn't be too late back. See you soon. Bye, Lenny." She kissed her husband goodbye, before turning and walking swiftly out past the Apparition wards.

Leonard Lovegood gazed ruefully into his own glass. "I'll say this for you, Mel. You don't ever give up, do you? I'm so glad you've never decided to make me one of your projects." "

Come in." said Severus idly as someone knocked on his door. To tell the truth, he was rather hoping for a distraction. He just hoped it wasn't news of another fight in the Slytherin common room. Or someone else discovering their parents had been on the wrong side during the war. Now that was always fun to deal with, wasn't it?

He was pleasantly surprised to see Melissa Lovegood enter.

"Mel! Come in, sit down, let me take your cloak. Can I get you a drink?"

Melissa slid into a chair, after allowing Severus to remove her cloak and hang it carefully behind the door.

"No thanks." She scrutinised him carefully, causing Severus to squirm. Melissa had a way of making him feel as if she could read minds. "How have you been, Severus? Really." She was giving him a look he wasn't used to seeing, certainly not on Mel Lovegood. A look of surprising gentleness.

"You came all this way to enquire after my wellbeing? Mel, how touching. I had no idea you found me so irresistible. I mean, I know I can't help being Aphrodite's gift to witches but even so..."

"Severus." Mel's voice cut straight through the charm. "Stop trying to change the subject. You're obviously not going to give anything away of your own accord, so I'll get straight to the point. Did you see Caitlin on Wednesday evening?"

The charming smile faded. For the briefest of moments, Melissa thought she saw a fleeting glimmer of pain there, before the mask went up again.

"Why, does she need an alibi? In trouble for Auror brutality again, is she?"

"Maybe." said Melissa. "Were you with her?"

"Why do you need to know?" Severus asked, the defensiveness of years out in force.

"That's a yes then." replied Melissa coolly.

"Not necessarily."

"Then deny it."

"I don't have to explain my every move to you, surely!" Severus snapped at her, bristling.

Melissa did not take her eyes off him, continuing to fix him with that intense tell-me-everything look of hers. Severus squirmed guiltily, heartily wishing she'd go away before he said something he shouldn't, something incriminating.

It was a while before Melissa answered him. When she did, it was in a tone of voice that reminded him eerily of Caitlin.

"You were right, love. I do suffer so beautifully, don't I?"

Severus felt the blood drain out of his face. "What the hell are you talking about?" he hissed at her.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about." Melissa leaned forward, her face deadly serious. "What happened that night, Severus? What happened, that you get in at one in the morning, looking like you've been in a fight? That you feel the need to curl up and get drunk afterwards? That you had to pour your heart out to a fourteen year old girl, and manipulate her into healing you so no one would know you'd been in that state?"

"I did not manipulate her!" Severus practically screamed. He immediately buried his face in his hands, realising what he'd said.

Melissa sat back in her chair, nodding grimly. "It's true then. You met up with Caitlin and got yourself beaten up for your pains. I do hope you weren't using the old 'You're still in love with me' line again. You know what a temper she's got."

Severus didn't meet her eyes. "No." he said, with difficulty. "No, I didn't say that to her. She said it to me." He stopped talking and stared at the floor, covering his eyes with one hand. Melissa waited while he tried to recover himself. At length he looked up, but still did not look at her. "It's true, you know. I do love her. Always have. Gods, Mel, I love her so much." His voice cracked on the last word and he swiftly hid his eyes again.

Melissa got up and moved round to perch on the arm of his chair, in much the same manner that Luella had done the week before. Melissa, however, had known Severus for long enough not to share her inhibitions. Sliding her arms around him, she pulled him into an embrace, soothing him until he was ready to continue.

"She will not want me now." he said, despair in his every syllable. "She hates me. Despises me. I'm the lowest of the low, worthless in every way. I'm scum, worse than scum. She loathes me. Absolutely loathes me, Mel. I make her skin crawl. Gods, Mel, why did I think she could ever love me? After what I did to her? I am nothing, Mel, I'm subhuman, I'm such a bloody disgrace to wizardkind..."

"It's all right, Severus." Melissa said quietly, continuing to soothe him. "Don't blame yourself, you did what you had to in order to save her."

"Lily didn't see it that way." Severus whispered. "Nor did you. Do you remember when I came to you after Voldemort fell, asking if I could see Caitlin? You agreed to ask her, then came back and told me she didn't want me anywhere near me ever again."

"But nevertheless I did ask." said Melissa. "I did ask her."

"You shouldn't have done." Severus said, his voice changing to sharp and abrupt. "She was absolutely in the right. What I did... there was no excuse. And no possible forgiveness. What she suffered because of what I did to her... Well, at least the debt's settled now. Settled with interest. At least she can't say I don't know what she went through."

Melissa froze, going numb as a horrible sense of foreboding gripped her. "Severus," she said, trying to stay calm, "what happened? What did she do to you? Tell me!" Her voice betrayed the rapidly rising hysteria.

"I can't." she heard him say. "I just... I don't want to talk about it. Don't make me, please."

She held him, trembling, the conclusions her mind was presenting her with striking fear into her heart, fear for herself, fear for Severus, but most of all fear for Caitlin.

"She didn't torture you." she whispered.

"Worse." She could barely hear the response, it was muffled by what could have been a sob.

"Worse than torture... Severus, no." Melissa breathed. "But how..."

"Dishabilius and Bodybind." he said, his voice devoid of any emotion. "That's how. Got to hand it to her, she's ingenious." He laughed his rapidly-becoming-trademark bitter laugh.

Melissa comforted him, fighting back her own feelings of horror. "Ssh, Sev, it's all right. It'll be OK." She felt her heart protest in pain, but regret it as she would, there

was really no other option. "I'll help you press charges, I'll make sure there's a full inquiry. I'll support you every step of the way, Severus."

Severus immediately broke away from her. "What do you mean?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"I can't let her get away with it." said Melissa imperiously. "I mean, I've tolerated her excesses until now, because it's only ever been Dark Arts practitioners who've suffered, and much as I hate to admit it, it's got results. Just putting her in charge of a case gets them turning themselves in. But this time, she's gone too far. She may be my friend, but I can't let her get away with torturing and sexually assaulting an innocent man. I shall have to fire her. We'll have to prosecute."

Severus shot to his feet, causing Melissa to nearly fall off the chair in surprise.

"You will do no such thing!" he snarled at her.

"I beg your pardon?" Melissa asked.

"I said, you will not punish her." he said, his voice shifting back into its usual self-assured tones.

Melissa got up, her face a mask of ice. "Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Severus. She's an Auror. I expect certain standards from my Aurors, certain standards from all mages! And she's broken them. She acted like a Dark witch! I can't have someone who's no better than the ones she's meant to be arresting as my Deputy. And you! Don't you want to see justice done?"

"It already has been." said Severus firmly. "An innocent man, you called me? Come on, Mel, you know my past. I have committed atrocity after atrocity, and I enjoyed it. I never stood trial for any of those crimes, the survivors and the relatives of the ones who didn't make it never got any kind of recompense for their suffering. Until now." He shuddered. "Mel, I am not innocent. She did it to me because I did it to her first. She is what she is because of me. I should be in Azkaban. I should have been Dementor Kissed. I wasn't because I was more useful to the Ministry alive. Consider me the first of those miserable wretches who turned themselves in on her account." He smiled thinly. "Mel, I deserved it. In a way, I'm glad she did it. We're even now. The debt's settled. Maybe she can stop hating me now. Maybe she can get on with her life now. Maybe she can be happy now. It won't be with me, of that I am sure, but I'd like to see her smile again. I'd like to see her able to love again." A look of wistfulness crossed his features.

Melissa just gazed in disbelief. "Severus, you amaze me. She uses you, abuses you, treats you like you're filth, and what do you do? Worship at her feet and beg for more. Sev, wake up! Stop being so blindly in love with her and open your eyes! The woman is a brutal, violent psychopath!"

Severus sighed in blissful adoration. "Yes. She is, isn't she?"

"Severus!" Melissa screamed in frustration. "Snap out of it! She is no good for you! Aren't you at all interested in stopping her from doing that to anyone else?"

"She wouldn't do it to anyone else." Severus replied, serious once more. "She doesn't need to. She's expended her rage on me, and it's over. I'm the only one she harboured vengeance against and she's got it now. Mel, there is nothing to be gained from disciplining her, and a lot to lose. Where will you find another Deputy as gifted, talented and most importantly, loyal as her? The only other choice is Marcus Vetinari, and he's made no secret of having been after your job for years. You'd be mad to sack her. And if you try and bring any kind of case against her, I will not testify. You'd have to face the interesting challenge of trying her for a crime that there's no apparent victim to. Don't think I wouldn't lie for her sake." He gazed intently at her.

"There's other ways of acquiring evidence, Severus." said Melissa quietly, giving him the same look right back. "I don't need your testimony."

"You probably don't, do you?" Severus laughed. "All right, if you won't refrain for my sake or Caitlin's, how about your own god-daughter?"

"What about her?" said Melissa sharply.

"She's already fatherless; would you take away her mother too? Leave her orphaned? She adores her mother. She'd never forgive you if you sent her to Azkaban." Severus turned on his most persuasive manner. "It would tear her apart, Mel. Absolutely destroy her. Do you really want that? I don't think you do. Quite apart from anything else, I'm sure you want the Redemption to go ahead as much as I do."

"What does that have to do with anything?" said Melissa, bemused.

"Luella cannot do it without Deanna, of that I am sure. They need each other. If Deanna falls apart, Luella will follow. Maybe not immediately, but eventually. Luella is kind and compassionate, yes, but she does not have her friend's toughness. The strain will be too much for her without Deanna's support. And if Luella goes..." He let Melissa finish the sentence for herself.

He watched as she sank into a chair, defeated.

"Damn you, Severus." she said. "How do you manage it? All right. All right. I won't bring charges." She looked up sharply. "But I still mean to have words with her. I hope she's properly remorseful."

"As you wish, Mel." murmured Severus. "As you wish."

Caitlin jerked with a start as the door slammed open. Daylight. Now that wasn't good. She'd laid her head down on the desk for just a few moments at three in the morning to get some rest, and now...

Now she was being confronted by an angry Mel Lovegood storming in.

"Sleeping on the job, were we?" said Melissa scathingly. "Not good, Caitlin. Your reflexes are letting you down. Your standards are slipping, Tyler." She closed the

office door behind her and strode over to the desk, leaning over it, looking Caitlin dead in the eye.

"They are slipping indeed, Caitlin." Melissa said, the softness of her voice doing nothing to hide the menace beneath. "I saw Severus last night."

Caitlin was fully awake in a second. "Severus?" She swiftly recovered her usual poise. "What did he have to say for himself then?"

"Quite a bit, once I'd got past his defences. Caitlin Tyler, what the hell have you done??" Melissa's anger had changed to disbelief.

"I don't know what you're talking about." said Caitlin obstinately. She smiled her most charming smile, reserved for special occasions only. "Sit down, Mel, relax. You know Sevi, hardly a good word to say about anyone."

Melissa shut her eyes and looked away. "Don't even think about it, Caitlin. He told me what happened. What the hell were you thinking of?"

Caitlin turned off the Glamoury with a sigh. Looked like she was cornered. "I did nothing to him that he has not done to others in his time." she said, staring back at Melissa with all the stubbornness she could gather. "I did nothing that he did not do to me."

Melissa sank wearily into a chair. "Caitlin, you little fool." she whispered. "Was it really necessary to break the law to do it? Are you so tormented by revenge that you have to stoop to our enemies' level? Do you have any idea what you've done to him?"

Caitlin pricked up her ears, intrigued. "No, what have I done to him?"

"You have shattered him, Caitlin. I have never seen him that badly hurt, never. Granted, his self-esteem has never exactly been high, but I've never seen it gone entirely. He considers himself worthless, the lowest of the low. He hates himself. Really loathes himself and his entire existence! Called himself subhuman and a disgrace to humanity. Proud of yourself, Caitlin?"

Caitlin had gone from being curious to wearing a strange, numb expression. When she did speak, her words came haltingly, from another plane entirely.

"He does know what it felt like for me then." she whispered. A look of dawning horror crossed her face. "Oh my god, Mel, what the hell have I done?? Sevi!" She shot to her feet, almost screaming the last word, and began pacing the room, head in her hands.

"What have I done to him, what have I done, he will never forgive me, never want me now, I've ruined everything, Hecate help me Mel, what have I done???"

Melissa watched, anger fading into a detached mixture of surprise, relief, amusement and the familiar and welcome urge to manipulate. Clearly Caitlin wasn't as far gone into hatred as she'd thought. There was hope yet.

"You know, that's not a million miles away from what he said to me." she said casually. "Don't lose hope just yet. For instance, it's largely down to him that you're not currently on your way to Azkaban pending an official inquiry and a court case. He said that if I did any such thing he'd refuse to testify. I don't know what you did to deserve it, but evidently you've not killed off his feelings for you entirely."

Caitlin stopped pacing and spun round. "He did that? He was willing to lie to keep me out of trouble?"

Melissa nodded. She watched as a smile of relief began to creep across her friend's features.

"He still cares about me?" Caitlin whispered.

"He does." Melissa said, suppressing the urge to grin in favour of her usual cool exterior. "I wouldn't push your luck just yet though. I think it's done quite enough for you lately."

"I have to go to him." said Caitlin, her every word strangled. She immediately collected her things together. "I have to see him, I have to talk to him, have to make him understand."

"I'm not stopping you." said Melissa, calm once more. She got up and settled herself down in her usual chair, firmly behind the desk. "I'll sort out things here. You go. Have a rest or something, you look shattered."

"Yes, yes I will." said Caitlin as she made for the door. Before she left, she turned to face Melissa once more. "Thank you, Mel." she said quietly.

"You're welcome." said Melissa, smiling as the door closed and she was able to return to her work once more. It looked like The Project was back on again. Caitlin made straight for home out of habit. No good seeing Severus looking less than her best after all.

One look in the mirror stopped her in her tracks.

"I can't face him like this!" she whispered. The late night showed. Dark circles under the eyes, hair in desperate need of doing something with, skin pale, robes crumpled and looking her age for once, Caitlin Tyler was not at her best.

"All right, all right, calm down CT, let's take one thing at a time here." she said to herself. Shower. Before anything else, a shower. Then a coffee. Then breakfast, perhaps. And then, time to get dressed, do her make-up and head out.

However, over breakfast, sat at the table in her silk kimono with a slice of toast in one hand and a mug of strong coffee in the other, her resolve to see Severus began to fade. After all, it wasn't like it couldn't wait for a few hours. It was Saturday, he wouldn't be teaching, she could see him in the afternoon. Right now, her prime desire was to do something she hadn't done for a long time, and spend the day having a little fun. More

specifically, she wanted the sun on her back, the wind in her hair, and something strong, powerful and speedy helping her achieve it.

Half an hour later, she was going through her wardrobe, dredging up outfits she'd not worn since the Seventies. Very tasteful, she, thought, giving an old lime green shirt that Lily had talked her into buying the once-over, shaking her head in disbelief at some of the things she'd used to wear regularly. However, it wasn't the psychedelic relics that she was after, but something a little more cutting edge. Finally, searching among the flares and fleeces, each one complete with its own little three piece luggage set of memories, she found them. A black leather jacket and matching trousers, along with a set of black sunglasses and a pair of black steel capped biker boots. It hadn't been Lily who'd persuaded her to buy these.

Let's hope they still fit me, she thought to herself. It wasn't like she'd put on a lot of weight since, and she did work out daily. However, there was no getting away from the fact that it had been a long time since she'd last worn them. She held her breath as she wrestled the trousers on. And let it out again with relief when not only did they fit, they actually fit her better than they had done in her twenties.

They were followed by her favourite black Lycra vest, the jacket, a hairbrush run swiftly through her hair, a black cloak and the sunglasses. Well, that was the outfit. Now, just one last thing.

No need to look far, she knew where they were even if she'd not touched them since she'd got them. In a box at the back of her wardrobe, long undisturbed, a physical emblem of one particularly nasty set of emotional baggage, crammed full of letters, photos, cards, papers and miscellaneous souvenirs from down Memory Lane, she found what she was looking for, tucked in a side compartment. A completely innocuous set of keys and a pair of black leather gloves.

She held them in her fingers for a while, remembering. The gloves were hers, but the keys weren't, not really. She'd been given the keys to hold in trust for a friend of hers. Just for a while, until he returned to claim his property. He never had, and it had stayed with her ever since, unused. Until now.

Wand in hand, she stepped out into the sunshine, and shook back her hair. A look in the mirror before leaving had thoroughly restored her sense of her own gorgeousness, and all in all, she was ready for anything. Ten minutes later, she was in Gringotts. The goblins were down among the Tyler vaults, retrieving the article she was here for, yet another remnant of her past being hauled out into the light for exorcism.

She turned and watched as it took five of them to wheel it out. The chatter in the bank fell silent as it gleamed in the light streaming in through the windows. Caitlin felt her heart leap. Although it would need testing before she could be completely sure, it looked like the Preservation Charms she'd laid on it before consigning it to its maximum security oublie had held good.

"Thank you." she smiled, tipping the goblins for their trouble. They bowed and returned to their work. Ignoring the looks everyone was giving her, she let her wand travel over it, checking that it would still work.

"OK, OK, this seems in order." she murmured, releasing the Preservation Charms.
"Now let's see how you shape up in action."

She slipped her wand back into its holder, and felt for her keys, her fingers locating the Harley Davidson fob and using it to pull them out. She paused before putting them into use.

There was no doubt about it, this was a superb machine. All chrome piping and black leather, made in 1957 in Detroit by a Muggle called Harley Davidson, restored and magically enhanced in Britain in 1974 by two young Aurors called Sirius Black and Caitlin Tyler.

A bittersweet smile crossed her face. He may have been a Gryffindor, but somehow they'd understood each other implicitly. He'd fallen in love with her, of course. And it had been fun, restoring the bike with him, turning it into something straight out of a Meat Loaf video, him teaching her how to ride it, flying together under the moonlight. They weren't lovers, she'd always turned him down, never losing hope that one day Severus Snape would stop obsessing over her best friend and notice her, but they'd always been close. He'd supported her when she'd been pregnant, and she still wondered what would have happened if... Stop it, Cait. Stop thinking about him, she scolded herself. He turned traitor, remember? Killed your best friend, remember? And this bike is yours now, all yours. After all, they've no use for Harleys in Azkaban.

Climbing onto the bike, she pulled on her gloves, inserted the keys and fired the engine into life, causing more than a few screams. Putting on her sunglasses, she grinned cheerfully at the shocked mages watching her.

"Trust me, I'm an Auror!" she laughed to one particularly handsome young wizard nearby, giving him a mischievous wink, before putting her foot down and steering the bike out of Gringotts, gathering speed as everyone dived out of the way. Hair flying back in the breeze, she cast a glamour around the bike to ensure invisibility, tweaked one of the controls that Sirius had added, and yelled in exhilaration as the bike went airborne. She was clear of Diagon Alley in seconds. Turning the bike around, she headed North, the wind in her hair, sun on her back and her heart lighter than it had been for years, riding to a date with her destiny. "Well? Are you going to talk to him?"

Deanna looked up in annoyance at the fool who had dared interrupt her breakfast. She was unsurprised to see Draco parking himself next to her.

"I am eating my breakfast, Malfoy."

"Yeah, but are you going to talk to him today?" said Draco, nothing if not persistent.

"I told you last night I would." said Deanna. "And I will. When I've had my breakfast."

"When will that be?" said Draco, fed up.

"When I'm full. Listen Malfoy, I know you like to stuff your food down and move on before it's even reached your stomach, but some of us prefer to savour our meals. These things cannot be rushed."

"But Tyler...!" whined Draco.

"I don't want to hear it! And don't whine at me like that. Do you have any idea how irritating it is? I will speak to him today, when I am ready. And not before! Now shut up, unless you want me to make you repeat the Quidditch related phrase I had you say last night in front of the whole school."

"No, Tyler." muttered Draco. He let his eyes wander around the room until they lighted on Ginny. "How well do you know Weasley's sister?" he asked.

"A little. Why?" said Deanna, the experience of years causing her to remain on her guard.

"I'm just wondering why she got put here when everything about her background screams Gryffindor. She's not obviously Slytherin material as far as I can see."

"From what I gather, she's been poor all her life and is getting a bit sick of it. That, Malfoy, is why. And if you're thinking she's not cut out for life as a Slyth, then think again. I'm certain she has Slytherin qualities there somewhere, she just needs time to develop them." Deanna recalled the Ginny meeting of the first night of term. "Which reminds me, Malfoy. I am warning you now. If I hear that either you or your friends have been treating Miss Weasley anything less than honourably, I shall be forced to come down hard on you. Understand me, Malfoy?"

"Loud and clear, Tyler." said Draco, unbothered. It wasn't as if he hadn't expected Deanna and company to take Ginny under their collective wings after all. "It's far more fun tormenting her brother anyway."

Deanna rolled her eyes. "You never get tired of picking on those three, do you?"

"But it's such fun! Weasel's so easy to manipulate, Mudblood shouldn't even be here by rights, and as for Potter..." Draco fell silent, gazing at Harry with a strange, hungry look. "I will show him who's best." he said softly. "Oh yes. I will." Deanna had never had much time for Draco Malfoy, but she rarely if ever broke her word. So it was that she hauled Luella out of the common room for a bit of moral support.

"Come on, Lu, Snapey's evidently been acting weirdly lately, and you and I are the ones best placed to find out why. Malfoy's not the type to come and ask for my assistance for no reason."

Privately, Luella agreed with her. However, she could also guess what was behind it all.

"Deanna, are you sure about this? I mean, Malfoy could be imagining things. Or it could be some kind of prank on his part."

"Lu, Malfoy may be an annoying and obnoxious little brat, but he is not stupid. If he says Snape is acting strangely and is breaking the habit of a lifetime by actually treating Gryffindor and Slytherin on equal terms, then there is something behind it. I'm certain it's not a prank either - why would Malfoy risk certain humiliation by asking me, of all people, for help? It doesn't make sense. No, there's something up here. Anyway, I promised."

"Yeah, you promised." said Luella, desperate for a way of getting out of this. "Why do you need me along? Surely you can talk to Snape on your own? I mean, you're one of his favourite students after all."

"So, Luella Martin, are you. I need back up, I need someone to give me a hand, maybe look out for things I might miss. Don't tell me you're scared." Deanna's tone of voice indicated that any answer other than no would result in a whole term's worth of mockery and derision. Luella knew better than to risk it.

"Of course not. I'm just not sure I want to find out about his private life. It could be quite personal!" Well, that much was true anyway.

"Blimey Lu, I'm just enquiring as to why he's suddenly favouring Gryffindor, I'm not doing a profile for 'This Is Your Life'. Stop worrying, he's hardly likely to tell a couple of students all the gory details of his private life, is he?"

Luella could only wish she didn't know better. "I know, but all the same, there's such a thing as too much information. Deanna, there's some things we're better off not knowing." Things like being in love with your House Master. Things like said House Master being an ex-Death Eater. And being your best friend's father. And your best friend's mother having recently beaten him up and done gods knew what else to him. Only thing worse than having to hide all that was having to be in a room with said House Master and said best friend while said best friend was unknowingly probing into all the secrets she was meant to be keeping hidden.

"You worry too much, Lu." said Deanna. "Anyhow, we're here." She led Luella into the classroom and knocked on Snape's office door.

"Come in." they heard him say, in his usual indolent tones. Deanna pushed the door open.

Snape glanced up, and immediately froze. Luella noticed the look of fear in his eyes before they glazed over again, and winced. Particularly worrying was the look she'd seen him give her, one of smouldering anger. This did not bode well.

However, his outward manner was charming enough.

"Good afternoon, ladies. And what brings you here? Not trouble I hope."

Deanna exchanged looks with Luella. Now that they were actually here, Deanna realised that she had no idea where to even begin talking. One panic-stricken look at Luella removed any hope of support there; her friend's attitude was all too obviously one of 'this was your idea, you get on with it'. Well, no help for it now.

Deanna slid gracefully into a chair. "Not as such. I gather you took some points off Malfoy yesterday."

"I may have done." Snape replied carelessly. "Why do you ask? It's hardly unusual for a teacher to take points off a misbehaving student, is it now?"

"It is when you're the teacher and the student in question's a Slytherin. You never take points off Malfoy. Never. What gives?" Deanna gave him her renowned Penetrating Look. Luella tried to look unobtrusive as Snape gave Deanna the exact same look right back.

"He was breaking school rules. Miss Tyler, are you trying to tell me my job?"

"No, sir." said Deanna hastily. "Just that it seemed a little out of character for you. Lu and I were wondering if everything was OK."

Luella sank lower into her chair, staring fixedly at the ground. It didn't save her from noticing the extremely icy look that Snape was giving her.

"Were you now. How touching." he said, voice dripping with sarcasm, his eyes not leaving Luella for a minute. "Well, you need not trouble yourselves on my account. I don't believe my personal life is any of your concern, but let me assure you that I am quite capable of dealing with it without any help from you."

Didn't seem that way the other night, Luella thought to herself. However, wisdom dictated an entirely different course of action.

Getting to her feet and flinging a low strength glamour around herself, she grabbed Deanna by the arm.

"See? I told you he was fine. Right, you've kept your word to Malfoy, let's go." She turned to Snape, flashing her best smile. "Sorry to have bothered you, sir. I did try and talk her out of it, but she would insist. Come on, Deanna."

"Lu, what the hell...?" protested Deanna as she found herself hauled to her feet. "I'm not done yet!"

"Oh, I think we are." said Luella, dragging her friend doorwards. She glanced back at Snape. The anger appeared to have abated, and he was now raising an eyebrow at her, looking as if he were trying not to laugh. Well, better laughter than fury, she thought. Betraying Severus Snape's trust was, as she knew all too well from her own past, not a smart move.

They were disturbed by a noise from outside. Someone had just kicked the classroom door open and was now making firmly for the office door. Someone wearing steel-capped boots by the sound of it.

The door burst open. Deanna stopped wriggling in Luella's grip immediately.

"Mum?" she gasped.

Caitlin stopped dead in her tracks on seeing her daughter.

"Deanna!" Mother and daughter said nothing more, just staring in surprise. Deanna looked her mother over, suddenly realising she'd not seen that particular outfit before.

"Mum, you're wearing leather!" said Deanna in horror.

"So?" said Caitlin, defensively.

"So suppose someone I know sees you dressed like that! Good gods, Mum, you look indecent! For Hera's sake go and put some clothes on! Please!" begged Deanna.

Luella glanced at Snape, wondering how he was taking the sudden entrance of a leather-clad Caitlin Tyler. Then she remembered.

"What are you doing here." she said, her voice letting Caitlin know exactly what she thought of her.

"I'm on a social call." said Caitlin. She scrutinised Luella carefully, seemingly sizing her up, before a look of understanding seemed to dawn. She gazed at Luella for a while, before looking at her daughter, seemingly doing some extremely quick thinking. Then, her attention turned to Snape.

He raised his eyes to meet hers. Luella shivered as a connection composed of love and hate and remorse and longing and who knew what else sparked between them. Then, Snape looked away, breaking the link with a look on his face that said all too obviously "This is too much; this hurts."

Deanna looked from one to the other, clearly picking up on it too but not knowing what to make of it. "What's going on?" she asked, her voice trembling, sounding much younger than she actually was. "Mum?"

"Deanna, go. Just go." said Caitlin, distracted. "Now."

Luella grabbed her friend's arm. "Come on. I think this is one of those things you're best off not knowing." She bundled Deanna out of the door, but before following her out, she turned to look at Snape and Caitlin. While Deanna was certainly best off out of it, she was far less keen on leaving Snape alone with her mother.

Caitlin, however, was having none of it. "Both of you." she said pointedly.

"Professor?" Luella said, ignoring Caitlin entirely.

"Luella. Go." he said, his eyes on Caitlin. "I'll deal with this."

"Are you sure...?"

"Yes." said Snape firmly. "This is between Caitlin and myself." Deanna turned to Luella as soon as they were both out in the corridor.

"Well? What the hell was going on there? And don't tell me you don't know! I saw the way you were looking at Mum. Something's wrong, isn't it?" Deanna said, somehow managing to combine desperation with the Look That Needs No Description.

Luella squirmed uneasily. Deanna was clearly owed some kind of explanation, and yet the truth would never do. Not all of it anyway.

"All right, all right. They had some kind of fight."

"A fight? What sort of fight? Verbal? Physical? When, when were they meeting up?" Deanna fired the questions at her in quick succession, seeking all the gory details, mind running wild with concern for them both.

"Last week. I think they were having one of their regular Redeemer Update Sessions. Anyway, it got physical."

"Physical... Did he hit my mother??" snarled Deanna, drawing her wand and preparing to head straight back in there. Luella grabbed her arm.

"No! She hit him. I ran into him while he was on his way back - I'd been having a restless night and wanted some Sleeping Potion. He looked in an awful state. He must have said something he shouldn't, something to really wind her up. He looked like she'd given it her worst. Ended up healing him, although he wouldn't tell me what happened. I guessed it was her though, from the way he was all quiet and not saying anything much."

Deanna put her wand away, staring at Luella in shock. "My mother... beat him up? Oh my god." She folded one arm across her chest, the other holding her head. "So that's why he was acting so strangely. Oh Hades, Lu." She wiped her eyes, looking at her friend in abject misery. "I suppose that's why she's here, to apologise. Bloody hell. Poor Snapey. Damn it Lu, why do they have to fight? Can't they just have a civil conversation and get on with each other? Can't they just relax and enjoy each other's company? I thought they were friends, why do they have to hurt each other so much?" Her voice cracked, and she swiftly hid her eyes. Luella stepped forward and comforted her, pulling her into an embrace. Deanna returned it, slipping her arms gratefully around her friend's waist and burying her head on her shoulder. Luella gently smoothed her hair.

"Don't cry, mate. It'll be OK. They'll patch things up, you'll see." Luella didn't really believe it, but nevertheless she hated seeing Deanna upset. Which meant there was only one thing for it.

"Hey. Tyler." Deanna looked up, straight into Luella's eyes. Luella smiled tenderly and wiped the tears away before continuing.

"Forget. Forget you ever saw your mother here today. We left empty-handed after Snape refused to tell us anything. You're none the wiser about what's going on, but you reckon he was just having an off-day."

Deanna went into the familiar trance before shaking herself and blinking. She sniffed before speaking.

"Think I'm getting a cold, Lu, I'm really snuffly at the moment. Got any tissues?"

"Back at the dorm. So. Any thoughts?"

"None. And you were a fat lot of good there, weren't you? Said nothing then dragged me out of there before I could get anything out of him. Nice one, Lu."

"Sorry, DT. But he didn't seem very co-operative there, did he? He clearly wasn't going to tell us. We'll just tell Malfoy he was having an off-day or something."

"Fair enough." said Deanna. "Now, about those tissues. Come to think of it, my eyes feel really weird too. Sore, like I've been rubbing them."

"Come back to the dorm and wash your face. Maybe that'll sort you out. Probably something down here getting in your eyes." said Luella, attempting to distract her.

"Suppose. Come on, let's get back. You make up something to get Malfoy off our backs while I sort myself out." And with that, Deanna headed for the common room. Caitlin waited until she heard the classroom door closing before sitting down. Now she was actually here, she had no idea what to say to him. Severus was watching her, apparently calm, his features betraying little hint of emotion. However, Caitlin was not Deputy Head of the DDAE for no reason. She could read all the little physical signs, the stiffness, the hands clenching the arms of his chair, the slight lean away from her, all the little indications that Severus was on his guard and ready to defend himself if need be. Most of all the eyes, eyes that had once regarded her with affection, but were now little pools of fear. He doesn't trust me anymore, she thought in despair. Maybe he will never trust me again.

"What are you here for, Caitlin?" he asked, his voice brusque and defensive, with a sneer that she knew better than anyone was designed not to mock but to keep her at bay. "Not had enough of tormenting me yet? Cruciatus not enough for you? Why not use the other two on me as well, make a clean sweep of it?"

"Sevi..." she began. He cut her short.

"My name" he said, "is Severus."

Caitlin quietly gave thanks for her training. It made hiding pain so much easier.

"All right then. Severus." she said. She recalled Mel's words, that Severus had pointblank refused to assist in any prosecution attempt. Hard to reconcile that with the angry, hostile and above all, frightened man in front of her.

"Mel told me you'd managed to talk her out of prosecuting me." said Caitlin. "I... I wanted to say thank you."

"Well, at least you're properly grateful. You might be a violent, vengeful Harpy, but at least you're a well-mannered violent, vengeful Harpy." said Severus.

"Why'd you do it, Severus?" asked Caitlin, emotion starting to come through. "Why did you stop her? What's wrong with you, why didn't you want justice done? I would have done."

"I know." said Severus. "I know you did." He seemed to relax a little, evidently reassured that she was not about to pick up where she'd left off. "Let me get one thing quite clear, Caitlin. I didn't do it out of the goodness of my heart. I most certainly did not do it out of love for you. I did it because I don't want to see Deanna motherless as well. And I did it because I think that justice has been done already." Finally, he met her eyes. Caitlin winced, but it wasn't the pain in them that caused it. It was the accompanying emotion of cold, cruel indifference. "We're even now, Caitlin. You don't owe me anything, and more importantly, I don't owe you. The score is settled. You can try all you like to manipulate me, play on my sense of guilt about my past wrongs, try and punish me anew with each meeting as if I'm some latter-day Prometheus. But it won't work. As far I'm concerned, justice has been done. I've had my punishment, and it's equal to anything the Dementors could dish out. Congratulations, Caitlin. In a twisted kind of way, you've finally laid my past to rest. The price of that is that you'll never be able to use it against me again. You've lost that power. So don't even bother playing the traumatised victim for me anymore. We are even. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Severus." said Caitlin, somehow managing to avoid crying. She got to her feet. "Guess there's little point in me sticking around, is there?"

"No, not really." said Severus, his attention now returning to the lesson plans he'd been working on before.

"I'll just go then, shall I?" said Caitlin, moving slowly towards the door, wanting to give him one last chance to stop her leaving, one last chance to give in and come after her.

"If you could. Close the door on your way out, won't you?" said Severus, with a coolness that he surely did not feel.

Caitlin turned away with a heavy heart. If Severus did still harbour any affection for her, he was doing a good job of hiding it. She'd been a fool to think she could salvage anything now. However, there was one last thing she owed him.

She turned back to face him as she stood by the door, her hand poised on the handle as she prepared to leave.

"Severus, I... I'm sorry." she said, not looking at him. He didn't answer. Then, without anything further for her to say, she was gone, the door closing behind her.

Severus did not move as he heard her leave. He waited, poised, holding his breath, waiting for the tell-tale slam of the classroom door that told him she was well on her way and not coming back. Then, and only then, did he move again, slumping forward

onto the desk, head in hands, and begin to weep for what could have been. Melissa was not surprised to see Caitlin on her front doorstep that evening. She was, however, amazed by the method of transport that she'd used.

"Cait, isn't that...?"

"Yes, it is the Horned Angel." said Caitlin, sounding too tired to care. "I retrieved it from my Gringotts vaults this morning. Felt the need to go riding again. Still works too - managed to get it to Hogwarts then back here in a single day. If it gets me home, that's five hundred miles in a day. Pretty good going given it's over thirty years old." She walked into Melissa's study and slumped into a chair, feeling her thirty five years and looking utterly dispirited. Melissa quietly instructed Sukey to fetch two cups of tea and then ensure they were not disturbed.

Melissa listened as Caitlin poured out the story of her encounter with Severus, clutching a mug of hot tea, staring at the patterns made by the steam as they twirled delicately into the air.

"It's over, Mel." said Caitlin, listless and lifeless. "He didn't say it in so many words, but it's over between us. He can't bear me anywhere near him. Do you know what he said to me?" She shivered as she recalled the words. "He said we were even now. That there was nothing either of us owed the other. Said I could never hurt him again. No words of love. No forgiveness. Just... this indifference. As if he didn't give a damn any more. He doesn't love me any more, I've lost him, lost him, lost him!" Caitlin began to sob. "Why the hell did it take me so long? Just as soon as I realise how much he means to me, I go and ruin everything! Any time these last three years, he was mine for the taking, and what do I do? Turn him down. Gods, Mel, why am I such a fool?" She was crying openly by now.

Melissa soothed her. "Don't blame yourself, Caitlin. Anyway, you didn't realise how much he meant to you until now, did you? Right up until last week you blamed him for everything that had gone wrong in your life and hated him with a passion. Now you've forgiven him and realised you're still in love with him. And why is that?"

"Because I'm a stupid, vengeful Harpy?" suggested Caitlin.

"No." said Melissa. "Because you've finally got rid of your hatred. Cait, listen. Maybe this is the best thing that could have happened."

"The best thing?! Mel, if this is the best thing, what was the worst?"

"Think about it." said Melissa. "Severus said you're even now. True, he gave it its worst connotation. But it's also true in a more positive light. You've got rid of your resentment and bitterness towards him. While he can stop blaming himself and giving himself the mental punishment he feels he deserves. You've both been gifted with a golden opportunity to offload your worst mental traumas. Yeah, you're brokenhearted, but you'll get over it. In fact, I'd say you're a lot more emotionally healthy tonight than you've been in years. You're healing already. And he doesn't seem that badly affected. After all, he feels he deserves it, as punishment for his Death Eater days. It was pretty traumatic for him, but he's able to give it some kind of meaning and come to terms

with it. He's healing too. Give him time, Cait. You both need time away from each other, to get your heads together. One day, mate. One day, when you've both sorted your lives out and realised how much you miss each other. One day, you'll see that familiar raven on your windowsill with the letter asking you to meet up. And you'll tart yourself up, go to meet him, fall straight into his arms and the two of you'll never be apart again. You'll see."

"I hope you're right." sighed Caitlin. "Because I don't know what I'll do if you're not." She drank her tea and sat back, gazing into the distance. "You know, I've never really loved anyone else. I know this sounds crazy, but I can't imagine life without him. I really can't. There's no one else I want, no one else I can imagine wanting. Every dream, every fantasy, every man I've ever had, they've all been him really. Always it's been him I've thought of. Not loving him is something I can't envisage at all. Damn Mel, I want him so badly!"

"He wants you too." said Melissa, the conviction in her voice not wavering for an instant. "He still loves you. I saw it in his voice, in his eyes. It goes both ways, Cait. As long as you are alive, there will never really be anyone else for him. He will forgive you, Cait, for the simple reason that being without you will hurt him far more!"

"You think so?" Caitlin asked, hope beginning to dawn.

"I know so!" said Melissa. "He just needs time. Time on his own, so he can start to miss you." A sly grin, not unlike her daughter's favoured expression, began to show itself. Caitlin couldn't help responding to it, starting to grin conspiratorially herself.

"See? You're cheering up already." said Melissa. "Now, obviously I can't have you working together on the Redeemer Project any more. You'll both be involved still, but you'll report to me instead of each other, while I'll make sure any vital information is passed on. How's that sound?"

"He won't have to see me, yet he'll still have to hear about and think about me." mused Caitlin. "Then there's the living reminder of his past walking around in front of him every day at Hogwarts, my darling daughter. Just being around her will remind him of me, and I can't see Severus wanting to distance himself from her. She might have his hair and eyes, but she's got my mannerisms and my playful streak. She's got my walk, did you know that? And she twirls her hair around her fingers when she's bored like I do. She's got my creativity and chutzpah too - I was always the one with the crazy schemes at school as well. Severus was always far too cautious to do anything like that. That famous cheek and nerve of hers comes straight from me. Every time he talks to her, it'll be like being in a room with me. Ah, Sevi, you won't escape so easily!" Caitlin laughed, cackling like the witch she was. "The Fates have woven our lives together, how can you possibly think to cut me off? It would be like slicing off your own hand. No, you'll never get me out of your head. Even if I'm far away, in another man's arms, I'll always be right by your side, there with every breath you take, there every time you wake, there when you close your eyes. I'll be in your every dream, I'll be the first thing on your mind when you wake up, the last thing on your mind when you fall asleep and not even the Draught of Living Death will give you any respite. Your heart is mine, your soul is mine, your body is mine, you belong

to me, you have no future without me! And until you accept it and surrender, you'll suffer the pain of knowing a part of your psyche is missing, the pain of knowing you're incomplete without me. As I do swear it, so mote it be!" Caitlin slammed down the mug, her eyes alive with an unholy fire. She shook back her hair and laughed in exhilaration. "Damn, Mel, that felt good!"

Melissa was gazing at her with a look that combined respect with a mild fear for Caitlin's sanity.

"Cait, you are something else, you know that? Were you Medea in a past life or something?"

"Strange you should say that, it was my mother's name." grinned Caitlin. "Medea Deanna Tyler. There's an old legend that claims the original Medea as an ancestor of ours. Don't know if it's true, but our family's littered with Medeas, not all of whom bore that name."

"Well, you could rival the original any day." said Melissa, shivering a little. "Caitlin, you're just a bit too good at making spine-chilling prophecies. Must be your Welsh roots coming through."

"It's a traditional skill of Tal-y-Rhys witches, and Welsh witches in general." said Caitlin. "Well, who knows what will happen. I'm not Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, after all. But he won't get away from me. I've waited for him to notice me ever since we were teens. I can wait a little longer. One way or another, he'll be mine. Oh yes." said Caitlin, her eyes burning with the certainty of a fanatic, heavily laced with a good dose of obsession. "He shall be mine."

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Chapter Seven A Day of Reckoning

It came as quite a shock to Luella to realise that it was Halloween already. The term seemed to have flown by.

Her friends, however, had other things on their minds. As far as Deanna and Marlie were concerned, the only topic worthy of consideration was Quidditch.

"Do you reckon we can do it this year?" asked Deanna.

"First team or reserves?" asked Marlie, busily engaged in planning a strategy for the first Slytherin Reserves game of the season. True to form, she'd not spent long mourning her demotion, but had immediately assumed the vacant Reserve Seeker position and the reserve team captaincy.

"Either." said Deanna. "First team. Reckon Malfoy's any good?"

"He's a good flier." said Marlie, giving nothing away. "I'd say he has the skill. However..."

"However what?" asked Deanna.

"He's not disciplined enough." said Marlie. "Look at him, the way he's approaching the Gryffindor game."

Deanna looked at Draco. "He seems pretty fired up about it. Obsessed, almost."

"Exactly." said Marlie. "His whole emotional being is hung up on Harry. He hates him to the point of obsession. He's not in Quidditch for the sporting aspect, he's there purely because Harry Potter is Seeker for his team, and anything Potter has, Malfoy has to have as well, and ideally go one better. You seriously don't think it was an accident that it was Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones that Malfoy wanted, do you? No, Malfoy wants to beat Potter. Which will prove his downfall in the end."

"How do you mean?" Deanna asked, fascinated. Marlie might not be taken seriously by most of her house but everyone respected her opinion on Quidditch.

"He's too emotional." said Marlie, toying idly with her quill, coolly weighing up her cousin's mental state. "In order to play Quidditch well, you need a clear head. You need to want to win, yet at the same time, be detached from it all. You need to be focused. Malfoy isn't. He's obsessed. That's not the same thing. His desire is ruling him. He's not in control of himself and it'll affect his game. As long as he has that Potter obsession, he'll never beat him."

"Never?"

"Never. You just wait, Tyler, the first team are really going to regret dropping me. He's not the player I am. I know that sounds arrogant, but it's true!"

"So what are you going to do about it?" asked Deanna.

"Nothing." said Marlie.

"Nothing?" gasped Deanna. "Come on, Marls. You're a Slyth. You must have some kind of game plan."

"My only ambition at the moment is to lead the reserves to victory. I've got a point to prove, DT. Our reserves are shocking, at least they were last year. Possibly their biggest flaw was not having a permanent Seeker. That's now sorted out at least. Anyway, I've put together a stable line-up, got rid of a few individuals who were insufficiently enthusiastic, trained you all hard, and put together a strategy. I think we can beat every other reserve team in the school, for the simple reason that all the other houses neglect their reserves in favour of the first team. The reserve trophy's ours."

"Yeah, but surely you're not telling me that there's no grand plan to unseat Malfoy." said Deanna, not believing for a second that Marlie didn't have something in mind.

"Deanna, if I was as obsessive and hate-ridden as him, there would be, but as it is... Besides, I really don't think I need one. His own flaws will hopefully do the job for me. Flint will regret ever picking him, and when they all see what I've done with the reserves, they'll start changing their minds."

"And what if that doesn't happen?" asked Deanna.

"Then we'll start taking action to make sure it does." said Marlie calmly. "Right, back to team strategy. OK, so I'm Seeker/Captain. Keeper: Alex Lynch. Beaters: Crabbe and Goyle. Chasers: Lucas Vetinari, Winter Montague and you. Reckon it'll do?"

"Hmm. It's not actually that experienced a line-up, is it? Yes, Alex is good and has been in the reserves since his second year. Winter joined at the same time, but let's face it, he's not the best, is he? Lucas is new on the team this year, and so, for that matter am I. Also bear in mind I could never do any flying as a kid on account of living in a Muggle neighbourhood, pure-blood though I am."

"Yes, but you have talent, kid!" said Marlie. "You were the second best flier in our first year. You've got in a fair bit of practice on the school brooms ever since. And you now have a broom of your own, namely my old Cleansweep Six." Mike Lovegood, as a way of making peace with his sister, had given her his old broom, a speedy Cleansweep Seven. While the ice hadn't exactly thawed, it did mean that they were now talking again.

"True. Although Mum reckons she's getting me a new one for Christmas. Reckons that a couple of Ravenclaws she knew at school have just set up their own broom company and will have their first prototype ready by Christmas. She's managed to persuade them to knock a ready-to-fly one out for me to, erm, test. It won't be a professional standard broom, but Mum says it'll be a match even for Malfoy's Nimbus."

"Cool!" gasped Marlie. "What's the company called? Ask if they'll do six more! We'll wear their logos on our robes if they like - if they're a new company they'll need the publicity surely?"

"Can't remember. Firebird, Fireball, something like that. I'll ask. Put pressure on your mum too, she's always been able to talk my mum into things like that. You know, I hope they're good brooms after all this - if they turn out to be rubbish I'll sulk."

"They won't. Your mum was Slytherin Chaser herself once, wasn't she? She knows her brooms." Marlie sounded more confident than she'd done for a long time. "We, Tyler, are sorted."

The two girls gave each other a high-five of triumph. Deanna noticed Luella watching them, bemused and just a little patronising.

"Hey, Lu. What's up? And stop looking at us like that. We're planning the kicking of Malfoy's arse and eventual Slytherin domination."

Luella could only sigh ruefully. "All this fuss over seven flying sticks and some enchanted balls. It's only a game, you two!"

"Only a game!" Marlie and Deanna blinked in disbelief.

"Quidditch is not only a game!" snapped Marlie. "It's a mystical experience! A way of expanding your horizons and achieving spiritual oneness with the universe, flier and broom in perfect harmony. Only a game, I ask you! Tyler, tell her."

"Lu, some of us happen to like Quidditch. There have been fights over this game. Blood has been spilt. Wars have been waged. It is important! And we're going to use it to kick Malfoy's arse."

Luella just shook her head. "Says a lot more about the emptiness of some people's lives than it does about the thing itself. But I'll take your word for it. Either of you two seen Rianne, by the way? I was going to ask her for a hand with my History of Magic essay."

Marlie rolled her eyes. "Need you ask? Curled up in *my* beanbag with *my* Game Boy playing with *my* Tetris game. Honestly, I spent all summer adapting the thing and now I'm here, I can't use it because Rianne 'm not addicted, honest' Stormosi keeps nicking it!" Marlie pouted.

"At least she's got the earphones on." Luella pointed out. "It could be worse, we could have to put up with the music as well."

"You wouldn't." said Deanna. "The reason being that after the third evening if hearing that tune over and over again, that machine would be in bits on the floor." She ignored Marlie's wince. "There's only a certain number of times you can hear it without going completely nuts."

"Don't worry, Marls." said Luella soothingly. "It survived being thrown violently across the room after Deanna kept getting repeatedly killed on the third level of Super Mario Brothers, after all."

"A very good thing I had the foresight to Deanna-proof it." sighed Marlie. "If only I'd Rianne-proofed it too. Who would have thought such a noted pure-blood could get so addicted to a Muggle toy?" She got up, determined to get her game back. One Summoning Charm later and it was in her hands, with Rianne staring in shock at the space where the screen had once been.

"What did you do that for?" screamed Rianne. "I'll lose my game! I was doing really well too!"

"Not any more." said Marlie, casually switching it off. "Besides, I have Mario Bros to finish, and I can't do that if you're always on it playing with your bloody building blocks. Honestly Ri, you're addicted, aren't you?"

"Am not." said Rianne sulkily. "I can stop playing Tetris any time I want to."

"Just walk away, can you?" asked Deanna, grinning. "Just put the Game Boy down and not feel any desire or craving to touch it at all?"

"Of course I can." said Rianne. "Just like that. I don't need Tetris to amuse me in the slightest."

"Go on then." said Marlie. Rianne went pale.

"What?"

"I said, go on then." Marlie said, a look of cool amusement firmly in place. "Let's see you. I, Marlie Lovegood, bet you, Rianne Stormosi, that you cannot go for a whole month without playing Tetris and not have a nervous breakdown in the process."

"You're not serious." said Rianne.

"Oh, I am." said Marlie, grinning. "I bet you can't do it."

"I bet I can." said Rianne, warming to the challenge. "What's at stake? Money?"

"No, not money. Pride." Marlie said, considering the possibilities. At last, one came to her. "If I win, you, for one game only, must join the Slytherin reserves. I'll organise a friendly with the Gryffindor reserves, and you play as Seeker in my place, using my broom. How's that?"

"Fiendish, Lovegood, fiendish." said Rianne. "OK, it's a deal. But if I win, then you have to do something for me."

"Like what?" asked Marlie languidly.

"Write my Defence Against the Dark Arts essays for me."

"What?" cried Marlie.

"I mean it. I can't stand the git. And I am sick to the back teeth of not getting any decent marks because I've got too much pride to grovel to his precious ego. You, on the other hand, appear to be getting top marks in that subject for the first time in your life."

"I can't help it if I'm naturally good." murmured Marlie, blushing.

Rianne looked sceptical. "Hmm. Well, be that as it may, you appear to be very good at that subject all of a sudden. So, if I win the bet, you're going to restore my marks back to their rightful total by writing my essays for me. Still keen on the idea, Marls?"

Marlie opened and shut her mouth a few times in fury, before seeming to come to a decision. After all, she reflected, what were the chances of Rianne actually lasting a whole month?

"OK, it's a deal. Shake on it?"

Rianne grinned and extended her hand. The two girls shook hands, sealing the deal.

"Just one thing, Stormer." said Marlie. "To ensure that there is no cheating." She removed the Tetris cartridge from the Game Boy and put it into its plastic case.
"Deanna, can I borrow Nestra?"

"If you want. Why?"

"I want to put temptation out of reach." said Marlie, her evil grin back. "So this cartridge is going straight to my father with instructions not to send it back until the month is up."

"What?" shrieked Rianne, all of a sudden looking a lot less confident.

"What's the matter, Ri? Getting cold feet?" purred Marlie.

"No." said Rianne. No one was fooled, least of all Marlie.

"Never mind." said Marlie, reaching for her quill and dashing off a note to her father, before wrapping note and game in an envelope, addressing and sealing it, ready for Nestra to take away. "I'm sure you'll find something else to occupy your time. At least, I hope you do. Otherwise it's going to be an awfully lonely month, isn't it?" The smile she gave Rianne as she attached the letter to Nestra's leg and sent the bird off, heading towards the owl-tunnels that led to the surface, was just a bit too sweet.

Rianne bit her lip, shaking, furious at Marlie for guessing that she'd been planning to steal it for a bit of illicit cheating on the sly while at the same time wondering just how she was going to last a whole month without Tetris.

"All right. All right." she said, half to herself. "I can do this. Just a month after all. Four weeks. Thirty days. I can do it. I am strong. I have willpower. I can manage."

"I'll get on with arranging the friendly then." said Marlie, grinning. This looked like it was going to be fun.

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That evening brought the traditional Halloween Feast. And in the first year girls' dorm, preparations were well underway, with Lydia expertly fixing Autumn's hair while giving Ginny a running commentary about Hogwarts feast.

"You'll absolutely love the feast, Gin. Apparently they go all out on the decor. Why, Lucas tells me that last year, they had a flock of live bats flitting around the ceiling!"

"I know. Ron told me." said Ginny absently, before wishing she hadn't. Thinking of Ron was still painful.

"Yes I suppose he did." said Lydia thoughtfully. "I keep forgetting you're pure-blood and we don't have to teach you everything. Autumn, stop fidgeting!"

"I can't help it. I'm bored! You're taking too long. Honestly, all you have to do is brush it out and make sure it doesn't look like Medusa's."

"Before or after Athene cursed her?" asked Lydia wryly. "Anyway, I'm done now. Mirror is thataway."

Autumn got up and examined her newly arranged tresses. "Hmm. Not bad. Still feels odd though."

"What, having a feminine hairstyle for once? Tcha. Typical English aristos, no concern for their appearance whatsoever. Come on, Gin. Your turn. You may know all about the feast, but you won't know about the Slytherin Halloween Party that traditionally follows it."

Ginny shook her head, a strange fear suddenly gripping her. "I... I don't know. In fact, I don't think I'll be going to the feast."

Both her friends turned in surprise.

"You what, Gin?" asked Autumn.

"Not go? Gin, it's your first Halloween feast, you can't miss that!" said Lydia in disbelief. "What's wrong, are you ill or something?"

"Yeah." said Ginny, clutching at this avenue of hope. "I'm really not well at all. I don't think I'll be up to a three-course feast." True enough. She was sweating, shaking, feeling more than a little scared and in no way up to eating anything.

"Go to Madam Pomfrey." suggested Autumn, her voice gentle. "She'll sort you out in no time. Then you can come to the feast with us."

"No!" said Ginny. She took in the looks Lydia and Autumn were giving her. "Er... no, I don't think so. I mean, it's not that bad. Not bad enough to trouble her with. I just need a quiet night in, that's all. Just a bit of rest. I'll be fine in the morning, you'll see."

"Well, if you're sure." said Autumn.

"We'll save a seat for you anyway." said Lydia. "So you can come and join us later if you like. And feel free to drop in on the party too."

"Maybe." said Ginny, smiling weakly, trying to keep a calm exterior. It wasn't too hard. Harder to fight was the voice in her mind telling her that she must remain in her dorm, that she mustn't go to the feast, that at all costs she must avoid others tonight.

At length, Lydia and Autumn were ready to go. "Now, are you sure you're not coming, Gin?" Lydia asked.

"No, you two go. I'll be fine." said Ginny. She felt anger rising in her, anger and violence and a deep desire to see them both gone, feelings which alternately thrilled and terrified her.

"All right then, if you insist." sighed Autumn. "We'll bring you back a goody bag. See you later."

"Bye." said Ginny, waiting with bated breath. As soon as the door closed, she let her breath out again. Scrambling through her trunk, it didn't take long to find what she was looking for. A small, black, leather-bound diary.

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"I still can't believe it's Halloween already." said Luella. "Seems like only yesterday we were just getting here."

"Well it is." said Deanna. "And please stop going on about it, that's the third time this evening. Don't make me get a diary out and prove it to you."

"I didn't know you had a diary." remarked Rianne. "You never seemed the type to confide your secrets in anyone."

"I don't. But if I did, I'd be forcing Luella to read it until she got it into her head that it really was Halloween."

"Ginny's got a diary." said Marlie, her mind not really on the conversation. She looked about her. "Where is Ginny anyway?"

They had now reached the Great Hall, and most of the school was present, but of Ginny there was no sign.

"Probably just running late." said Rianne carelessly.

Marlie frowned. "Well, Lydia and Autumn have turned up. You three grab us some seats, I'll go and see what's up with Gin. Catch you later."

The two first years immediately went on their guard at seeing Marlie approach. Rarely did older students go out of their way to acknowledge younger ones so obviously.

"Hello. Is something the matter?" asked Lydia, hoping that Marlie was not about to accuse them of neglecting Ginny.

"No, not really. I was just wondering where Ginny was. Is she OK?"

Marlie's pleasant smile did not soothe their fears one little bit.

"She's in the dorm at the moment. Said she wasn't feeling well." said Autumn. "She's all right though." she added hastily.

"Yeah, we told her to go the hospital wing if she felt any worse." said Lydia.
"Reckoned she wasn't too bad though so we left her to it."

"Oh. OK." said Marlie, mildly disappointed that she wasn't going to be able to chat to her favourite young Slytherin. "Send her my regards, won't you? Shame, I was looking forward to seeing her. Oh well. Catch you all later." She wandered off, seeking her friends out.

However, she had not gone far when she found herself tapped on the shoulder.
Spinning round, she breathed a sigh of relief on seeing it was only the twins.

"Hi boys!" she smiled. "Happy Halloween. How are you both, I've hardly seen you all term!"

"Yeah, there's a reason for that." said George quietly.

Marlie stopped smiling. She noticed that they were not wearing their usual cheery grins. "All right, you two. What is it."

"We wanted a word with you." said Fred. The stern look on his face really didn't suit him. Marlie couldn't help thinking he looked just like Percy, although she refrained from telling him that.

"What about?" she asked, attempting to use innocence as a shield, although her intuition told her exactly what it was about.

"Ginny." said George. They were both looking like Percy Weasley now.

"Marlie Lovegood, what have you done to her?" said Fred. Amazing. He even sounded like his older brother. Marlie quietly gave thanks that her own brother was as easygoing as he was. Mind you, until now she'd have said the same about the twins...

"I've done nothing to her." said Marlie obstinately. "Would you please explain what you're both on about?"

"You know perfectly well what we're on about, Marlie." said Fred. "Look at her. Before she came here she was a sweet, innocent young thing. Now she's hanging around with Vetinaris and Montagues and Slytherins of all kinds, and she's turning into one of them. We've had to watch her all term, laughing, sharing in the jokes, and generally walking around like she's too good for the rest of us. She's not spoken a word to any of us all term."

"Could that be because you've all been treating her like she's some kind of outcast since her Sorting?" said Marlie, patience wearing thin.

"Yeah, that's because she's turning Slytherin. She's hanging around with them, getting friendly with them, having fun with them!" snapped George.

Marlie blinked, before turning on the sarcasm. "What, a student getting on with their dorm mates? Surely not! How terrible! We can't have **that** can we?"

"That's not what we meant, Marls." said Fred. "It's what she's turning into in the process that bothers us. She's turning into a Slytherin! You are turning her into a Slytherin! Don't tell us you've not been mentoring her!"

Marlie could take no more. "That, Weasley, is because she is a Slytherin! I didn't decide that, the Sorting Hat did! Whether you like it or not, she is Slytherin now, and will be for the next seven years. And if she is going to survive in our house, she'll need to learn properly how to be one of us. Would you rather she spent her entire Hogwarts years being picked on by the rest of her house and not fitting in? I tell you now, I am not bringing out any qualities in her that were not there all along. I'm just looking out for her and teaching her how to make it. Mainly because her Gryffindor "All Slytherins are bastards" older brothers have been acting like she's not related to them all term!"

"Because she's changing, Marls." said Fred, sternness being replaced by a feeling of hurt. "She's changing and we're not at all sure we like what she's becoming."

"And what is she becoming?" Marlie asked, her own anger not soothed one bit.

"A Slytherin." said George, so softly that Marlie barely heard him. Not softly enough.

"A Slytherin." said Marlie. "So boys, let me see. You can handle Slytherins around you, you can handle them as friends. But when your own sister's one, that's somehow different, is it? What's the matter, can't handle it so close to home? Is it a variation on the old 'Some of my best friends are Slytherins but I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one'?"

Neither twin replied, just staring at their feet. Marlie shook her head in disgust.

"Well, if you can't stomach Slytherin qualities in those close to you, maybe you're best off just staying away from us altogether. Gods forbid you get too close to us. Slytherin in-laws are probably the last thing your family wants."

"Wait, Marlie, I didn't mean it like that...!" Fred reached out desperately for Marlie, who was already backing away.

"No, no, you've made yourself perfectly clear, Weasley." She spat the surname at him, making it perfectly clear that first-name terms were now a distant memory. "Gods know I wouldn't want your precious family name tainted by association any more." Turning away and brushing her hair back over her shoulders, she stormed off in a huff, taking a seat next to Deanna and pointedly ignoring the twins.

"What happened there?" asked Deanna.

"Nothing. Fred Weasley's a git, that's all." snapped Marlie. "Now where's this food, I'm starving."

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Fred watched her go before turning to his brother and giving him a sharp smack around the head.

"Ow! What was that for?" said George, rubbing his head.

"Now look what you've done. Marls isn't speaking to us. Nice one, bruv. Honestly, the things I let you talk me into doing."

"You were all for it earlier!" said George, surprised and more than a little annoyed.
"You were as hacked off as the rest of us about what Ginny was turning into."

"I'm not bothered about her being Slytherin, I'm just concerned she might be in a bad crowd. You were the one who started the whole 'She's turning Slyth and I don't like it' business."

"Which you were going along with right up until Lovegood made that in-laws remark..." He fell silent, noticing his brother going suddenly red. "Oh bloody hell, Fred, is that what this is all about?"

"No. Well, maybe. Look, all right, yes." said Fred irritably, sitting down at the Gryffindor table. "Honestly, all summer I've been making that much more progress, getting that bit closer, and I was almost, *almost* at the stage where I was ready to ask her out. Not any more. Thanks to you. Why, WHY, when she asked what we thought Ginny was turning into, did you have to say 'A Slytherin'? Did it not occur to you that she'd take it badly?"

"Sorry, Fred. Didn't think." muttered George.

"You don't say. George Weasley, you are a certified, one hundred per cent, bona fide prat."

"Sorry." said George, hanging his head.

"Good. Oh, and next time I'm trying to seduce a girl, just do me a favour and stay out of it, OK?"

"Yes, Fred. Sorry, Fred."

"Thank you. Now pass me the bread rolls, I'm starving." And with that, the Feast was underway.

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The first course and main course passed entirely without event. It wasn't until the dessert was being served that things started to happen.

Deanna glanced up from her chocolate gateau as a sudden movement from Luella caught her attention.

"What's up, Lu?" she asked.

"I don't know." said Luella. "But something's wrong. I can't explain it but something doesn't feel right. And my arm's itching like mad. Has been for the last five minutes." She was rubbing her upper right arm furiously.

"Maybe you're allergic to something?" said Deanna.

Luella shook her head. "Deanna, I've had virtually every dish on the table before now. Never had a reaction yet. I don't know, I just feel really strange. The back of my neck's prickling, it's like something's happening or about to."

Deanna was immediately on guard. "It's not... I mean, you're not... It's not Voldie is it?"

Luella shook her head. "No, this is different. If it is him, he's trying a new tactic. But I don't think it is. It's not an attack, more a warning. Some kind of sign. As if..." She fell silent, a faraway trancelike look coming into her eyes. When she spoke again, it was as if someone else was speaking through her. "As if something is coming to birth. As if some ancient power long buried is coming back to the light." She shook herself and seemed to recover. Now she was no longer in a trance but highly alert, eyes flickering around the room searching for something.

"Lu? Lu, what is it? Are you all right?" Deanna said, deeply concerned. Luella was not acting normally by any definition of the word, and this usually meant trouble. "For gods' sake, Lu, tell me what's going on!"

Luella didn't answer, just getting to her feet. "I have to go." she said calmly. "There's something I've got to do."

"Like what? Lu!" Deanna caught hold of Luella's sleeve, desperate for some kind of explanation. "Where are you going?"

Luella shook herself free. "You don't need to know. This is my affair, Deanna." And with that she was gone, still scratching her arm idly, leaving Deanna bewildered and terrified for her friend.

"What was that all about?" asked Rianne, who'd been watching from across the table.

"I don't know," replied Deanna. "but I have a very bad feeling about this."

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Luella hurried out of the Great Hall, up the stairs, drawn by an unknown force from within that was calling her, calling her onwards. This is your destiny, your fate, your power, come to me, come to me Redeemer child, come to me, she could almost hear it whispering.

"Yes." she whispered. "Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming."

She raced up to the first floor and turned into the main corridor when it happened. The itching on her arm, which had been getting steadily worse suddenly exploded into a burning sensation, as if someone had taken red-hot coals and was pressing them onto her arm. Luella screamed and sank to her knees, clutching it, trying to numb the pain. The summons had stopped, driven away and stopped in its tracks by the agony, centred on her arm but so intense that she couldn't concentrate on anything else. There was nothing else.

Sobbing, she leaned against the walls, eyes shut tight, desperately trying to stop the pain. Which, fortunately for her, is why she remained unaware of the scene up ahead, unaware of a giant shape rearing up above a small four-legged figure, unaware of something that sounded like a cat's scream, the dark shape retreating, and a small figure that had been busily engaged in writing something on the wall tying something to a torch before turning and running.

Finally, the pain ceased. Her arm felt normal again, well, more or less. It was still tingling a bit. Luella dragged herself to her feet and walked uncertainly along the corridor. This was where she'd been called to, she was sure. But why?

An answer of sorts was soon provided. Just opposite the girls' toilets, in between two flaming torches. Luella could see a dark shape hanging from one of the torch brackets. Picking up her robes to stop the hem dragging in the water that was flooding this part of the corridor, she approached it, a sense of foreboding gripping her.

Luella leapt back in fright. It was Mrs. Norris, Filch the caretaker's cat. She was frozen, stiff, eyes wide yet sightless, resembling nothing so much as a cartoon cat that had been flattened by some huge weight. It would have been funny if the situation hadn't been so threatening. That, however, was not what had scared her.

In between the torches, painted on the wall in big red letters, were two terrifying sentences, one of which meant nothing to her, the other of which was all too horrifyingly familiar:

*THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS HAS BEEN OPENED. ENEMIES OF THE HEIR,
BEWARE.*

Luella backed away in haste. She didn't know what it meant, or what it could possibly refer to (although she could come up with a few educated guesses, none of which were particularly pleasant), but she did know one thing. It was definitely not a good idea to stick around.

She was about to turn and run when she heard footsteps, and a voice saying "Harry, *what* was all that about? I couldn't hear anything..." then trailing off. Luella turned round.

Harry, Ron and Hermione were watching her in silence. Then Harry's eyes travelled across the lettering on the wall.

"Enemies of the Heir... Lu, what happened here?"

"I don't know!" said Luella in terror. "I just got here, and it was like this! I don't know who did it!"

Harry tried to soothe the frightened Slytherin as best as he could. Ron, however, was giving Luella a very dubious look indeed, which did nothing to quiet her fears.

Hermione, meanwhile, was examining Mrs. Norris. "What on earth happened to her?" she whispered. "Is she alive?"

"I don't know. It doesn't look like it." said Luella.

Ron's doubtful look changed to one of admiration. "You killed Mrs. Norris? Cool! Can you do Filch too?"

"I did not kill her!" Luella nearly screamed at him. "I just found her like this!"

"Course you did, Martin." said Ron, grinning, before turning to Harry. "We'd better get moving."

"Shouldn't we stay, try to help Mrs. Norris?" Harry said uncertainly.

"No." said Ron firmly. "Trust me, this is not a good place for us to be. You coming, Mione?"

Hermione nodded, splashing her way back over to them. The four children began heading swiftly for the stairs.

However, it was too late. A thunderous noise from downstairs indicated that the feast had ended and even now, students were swarming upstairs and pouring into the corridor. They were trapped.

The crowd of students came to a halt as they saw the words, the chatter dying away as they absorbed the scene before them. Luella caught sight of Deanna, Marlie and Rianne reading the lettering, then their eyes falling on her in horror.

The crowd parted as a small blond figure pushed his way forward, eyes shining, face flushed. Malfoy.

"Enemies of the Heir, beware!" he laughed. "You'll be next, Mudbloods!"

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What followed next passed in a blur. Dumbledore had arrived, removed the prone cat and instructed the four of them to follow him. They'd gone to Lockhart's office, followed by Lockhart himself, Filch, McGonagall and Snape.

Hermione watched as Dumbledore and McGonagall inspected the cat carefully. It really was a marvel how they could concentrate, she thought. Filch was sobbing uncontrollably, lamenting the fate of his beloved Mrs. Norris, while Lockhart was dancing around offering all sorts of suggestions. Then there was Luella to think about.

The Slytherin's normal friendly composure was gone, gone completely. She was sitting in a chair next to Hermione, staring into space, huddled up, rocking back and forth with a terrified look on her face, shaking and trembling, and for some strange reason, frantically rubbing her right arm. Hermione tried to comfort her, but Luella didn't respond. Hermione frowned. This didn't look good. While she didn't believe for a moment that Luella was responsible, there was no getting away from the fact that she looked scared out of her wits. What did she know that they didn't? The phrase 'Enemies of the Heir, Beware' sounded familiar and Malfoy clearly had heard it before. Maybe Luella did too. Was it some kind of Slytherin thing? Hermione looked surreptitiously at Snape. His attention was focused on Luella. That was no surprise - she was a favourite student of his after all. What was astonishing was the look he was giving her, a look of cold fury. And the way Luella was staring so fixedly into space, almost as if she couldn't bear to look at him. No doubt about it, something very strange was going on here. She recalled last year, when they'd thought Snape was psychically attacking Luella. They'd been wrong that time, but now...

She put the thought out of her mind. Stop it at once. Snape is a teacher, he is not using Dark Arts on his students. He's probably just angry that one of his students is involved in something like this, she thought. Which, come to think of it, explained a lot. Especially why Luella was so frightened. She didn't blame her, having to give some kind of account to Snape later. Mind you, she'd coped all right last Halloween...

At length, Dumbledore straightened up. "She's not dead, Argus."

Filch straightened up immediately, stunned. "Not dead? But what is wrong with her then?"

"She's Petrified. But how or why, I cannot say."

"Ask them!" spat Filch, pointing at the terrified students. "I bet they know! That Potter, he's got it in for me!"

"No student did this." said Dumbledore, his voice gentle but firm. "Not even one as gifted as Miss Martin here." Luella relaxed a little at this, but did not look up. "This is Dark Magic of the highest order, I do not believe any of them are capable of Petrification."

Filch opened his mouth to reply but he was cut off by Snape getting to his feet.

"I see, Headmaster. Well, in that case, having established that for once, these four have not been causing trouble again, may I see Miss Martin back to her common room? There is little else to be accomplished here, as far as I can see."

Dumbledore assented, and Snape made to grab Luella's arm. The girl immediately flinched away from him. Snape backed off and merely indicated for her to follow him out. Luella got up, head bowed and left. Hermione thought back to exactly a year ago, when Snape had also hauled Luella out of a rather compromising situation. Then, Luella had seemed fairly confident of escaping. How things had changed. Luella looked the opposite of confident now. Now, she looked like she was going to her execution.

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Hermione followed Harry and Ron out, preoccupied. The boys were discussing the evening's events.

"The whole thing's weird. What was that writing on the wall about? The Chamber has been opened. What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron looked thoughtful. "You know, I've heard something about that before. I think someone told me a story about a secret chamber at Hogwarts before. Might have been Bill..."

"I hope Luella's all right," said Hermione, voicing her own concerns. "She looked terrified."

Ron's expression changed to one of suspicion. "Terrified, you reckon. I think she looked guilty, myself."

"Guilty?" gasped Hermione. She shook her head. "Don't be silly, Ron, it wasn't her, it couldn't have been. Could it? Harry?"

Harry looked worried. "I don't know. It did look dodgy, finding her there on her own. I mean, what was she doing there? Shouldn't she have been at the Feast?"

Hermione shook her head. "It wasn't her, Harry! Lu is not like that, she's a nice girl. She does not go around Petrifying cats and writing spooky messages on walls. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all."

"Course she was." muttered Ron. "She's a Slytherin after all, they're the last people to fake charm and sincerity as a way of hiding their sneakiness, aren't they?"

"Ron!" snapped Hermione. She straightened up, indignant. "Luella is not sneaky. And she did not Petrify Mrs. Norris and put the writing up there. She wouldn't. It's not her thing."

"If you say so, Mione." shrugged Ron, clearly not convinced. "If you say so."

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Snape did not say a word to Luella as he led her through the school towards the dungeons. Not until they arrived at his classroom did he hold the door open for her and tell her briefly to get in. Luella did as she was asked, trembling. She'd never felt as afraid of him as she did tonight. She'd never seen him so furious. Not even in her first year. At least then she'd had Marlie and Deanna alongside her for a bit of support. Now she was completely alone and facing the Wrath of Snape.

He closed the door and turned to face her. She did not meet his eyes.

"Well?" was all he said.

"It wasn't me." she said quickly, praying that her nerve wouldn't give out. "Sir, I promise you, I swear it, I don't know who put the writing there or did that to Mrs. Norris. I just turned up and found it like that."

"Just turned up and found it." said Snape, the sarcasm already starting. "Just happened to be in the area, did you?"

"Yes!" said Luella. "Please, sir, you have to believe me, I had nothing to do with it!"

Snape just sneered at her. "Believe you. Really. Miss Martin, I hope you'll forgive me if I take your word for what it's worth. Not much, I think." He stepped forward and closed the gap between them, his twisted features inches from hers. Luella, trapped between her House Master and a desk, could only lean away in terror. "The conversation we had the second night of term was meant to be a secret known to the two of us only. So pray, tell me, why did I receive a visit from the Head of the DDAE the following week concerning that very conversation? She certainly seemed to know all about what we discussed. What did you say to her?!" Sarcasm shifted not-so-subtly into blind rage. Luella shrank back in fear.

"I didn't say anything to her, I promise!" she said, panicking. She tried to think. How could Melissa Lovegood possibly have known? Then it hit her. Lovegood...

"I'll bloody kill her." Luella said, half to herself. Fear melted into anger in a second. "I am going to bloody murder the woman! What I said to her was in strictest confidence, how dare she go running to her mother! Damn her, damn her, damn her!" She pounded her hand with her fist.

Snape's habitual sneer had returned. "So you poured your heart out to Marlene Lovegood." A hint of disbelief crept in. "Why?"

"She was there. And I could hardly turn to my best friend, could I? You saw to that, didn't you?" Luella's fear was completely gone by now. Interesting how anger could have that effect on her. She couldn't help thinking that Professor Snape was probably regretting teaching her that particular lesson. Or at least, he soon would be... "I really don't believe you, you know? You overstep the mark completely, go far, far beyond a simple teacher-student relationship, use me as some kind of shoulder to cry on and drag me into something no fourteen year old should have to deal with, and then you have the *nerve* to blame *me* when I need someone to talk to in turn! Did you know how I felt? Did you realise? Did you even care? You're lucky it was only Marlie. You're bloody lucky it wasn't Dumbledore." She was meeting his eyes now. Or at least she would have been if he hadn't been avoiding looking at her, looking rather embarrassed.

"All right. You've made your point." he said, the anger gone. In fact, although she couldn't swear to it, he even looked a little bit guilty. Luella felt her confidence return. It was probably the nearest she was going to get to an apology, much less an admission she was right.

"Thank you." she said, nothing if not gracious. Snape seemed to understand her, sinking into his usual chair and now acting as if nothing had happened.

"So. Tell me. What happened tonight. Why did you leave the feast, you were there for the first two courses." He was regarding her curiously. Luella took a seat opposite.

"I'm not sure." she said, trying to remember what had happened that night. "It was really weird. I was fine up until dessert, then I just got this really strange feeling. As if something was happening, or about to. I felt like someone was calling me, like there was somewhere I had to be, something I had to do. As if..." she hesitated, the memory returning, a memory of power, vitality and a deep, profound awareness. "As if it was my destiny."

She noticed Snape sitting up, sizing her up intensely. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the Heir, beware." he said, as if to himself. "The Heir of Slytherin... Go on. What happened, where did you go after you left the Great Hall?"

"I don't really remember." said Luella slowly. "I think I went to the first floor corridor, you know, where the writing appeared. But it wasn't me who put it there. You have to believe me." Panic began to resurface.

"I believe you." said Snape calmly. "Many wouldn't. Did you see anyone else there?"

Luella shook her head. "No. But that doesn't mean there wasn't anyone there. As I entered the corridor, I felt this awful pain in my arm. Couldn't see or do anything, it was that bad."

"In your arm?" Snape's whole attitude had changed to one of horror. "A burning pain? Like you were being branded?"

"Yeah." said Luella. "Sir, what is it? What's wrong?" He looked far more shocked than anyone had a right to be and this was doing nothing for Luella's nerves.

"Show me your left arm. And roll your sleeve back." he said. Luella did so, wondering what on earth was wrong with him. He examined her forearm closely, before letting her go, breathing a sigh of relief. Luella rolled her sleeve down.

"What was that for?" she asked, confused.

"Nothing." said Snape, actually smiling now. "Just a precautionary measure. All right, Miss Martin. You may go. Get some rest. It's gone midnight, I think we all need sleep. Especially you, child, you look worn out."

Luella was about to protest, but found herself yawning instead. "OK then. Goodnight, sir." She got up and turned to leave.

"Goodnight." she heard him saying. "Oh, and Luella."

"Yes sir?" she asked, stopping in her tracks.

"You were in the right. I'm sorry I shouted at you earlier."

"That's quite all right, sir." she said, rather embarrassed. "I'll, erm, be going then. See you in the morning." She left as quickly as she could. However, later she began to wonder if perhaps it might not have been a bad idea to tell him precisely which arm had been hurting...

Snape waited until she was gone before swiftly rolling up his left sleeve and checking his own forearm. Nothing there. He breathed a sigh of relief. One less thing to worry about. However, that didn't stop him spending the next hour staring broodily into space, pondering everything he'd seen and heard that night.

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Chapter Eight Secrets, Lies and Schadenfreude

There was only one topic of conversation in the Slytherin common room that night. If you could call it conversation. Most Slytherins were too shocked to say anything. Those that weren't, however, couldn't stop discussing it.

A smallish group of younger Slytherins had gathered next to the fire, seeking a little mutual reassurance not found when it was just one's dorm mates around you. Either that or they were seeking safety in numbers. Deanna suspected the latter. She looked around at the little gathering. No one there over fifteen. Nice to see their beloved leaders were sticking around to give support in a crisis. Just Lydia and Autumn sitting together, huddled up and scared, Autumn openly so, Lydia putting a brave face on it. Deanna couldn't help but think of herself at the same age. She suppressed a smile. Now was probably not the time to laugh.

Pansy was there, sitting on her own, curled up on a Care Bears bean bag that Marlie had dredged up from somewhere. Normally no one touched it unless it was the last seat available. In fact, "getting the Care Bears beanbag" was now a Slytherin synonym for drawing the short straw in any given situation. Things were obviously pretty desperate when someone like Pansy was voluntarily using it. My god, even she's admitting she needs support, thought Deanna. That no doubt also explained why she was giving Draco this rather pathetic little girl look.

Malfoy. Now there was a mystery. Slytherin's Mr. Cool (well, Mr. Cool wannabe anyhow) pacing around like a kid on Christmas Eve. Was everyone regressing to age five? Deanna checked to see that she wasn't displaying any obvious signs of childhood. To her great relief, she wasn't. Sitting quite normally in an inflatable Homer Simpson chair. Tasteless (why did someone so impeccably turned out as Marlie always was have such lousy decorative tastes? One of life's eternal mysteries) but at least it wasn't Care Bears.

Marlie was on Deanna's right, managing to grab the seat by the fire as usual. Even in a nuclear winter, you could probably count on Marlie to find the one shelter where the roaches hadn't made it. One of life's fortunate ones, Marlie. Typical Sagittarian, things always went right for them. Trust her to walk away from even a Sleeping Death trance without so much as a neurosis to call her own. Although this time, even the Slytherin Supernova looked worried. In fact, Deanna was forcibly reminded of how Marlie had looked when she'd first met her - small, shy and desperately insecure. She just hoped that was as far as the resemblance went - Marlie's bravery, confidence and sense of ethics were mostly hard-won trophies from her trance of three years ago. Deanna really didn't want to have to hang around with her if those went by the wayside.

On her other side, Rianne was perched on a black beanbag, folded into the lotus position, looking like a queen. She was one of the few who didn't look frightened. Well, she was the oldest present. Maybe she felt it was her moral duty to be strong for everyone else. Whatever, she was having a genuine calming effect on everyone. The two first years in particular were silently begging her to explain it all, make it go away. Whether Rianne would be able to follow through or not was another story.

And if Rianne was the queen, Lucas Vetinari was the undisputed king. Seated in between Rianne and his sister, he somehow managed to look dignified even in a blue inflatable chair. Dominating the gathering without even saying a word, you just knew that things would be OK, which probably explained why his little sister was actually acknowledging his existence for once. Remember me when you're Minister of Magic, Deanna grinned to herself.

"What happened to her?" asked Lydia in a daze, her eyes seeking some kind of meaning, any kind of meaning from the brother she adored, deep down. "I mean, why would anyone want to kill Mrs. Norris?"

"Maybe they met her?" suggested Rianne.

"What gets me is that it's always the same four students who get involved in things like this." remarked Lucas. "Something bizarre happens, and you can bet your entire family fortune that Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger and Luella Martin will be involved somehow. It can be a new addition to the list of Hogwarts Traditions. Sorting Ceremony, Choosing of Prefects and Head Students, Welcome Feast, Halloween Feast, Potter, Granger, Weasley and Martin Getting Found in a Compromising Situation."

Most of the Slytherins sniggered at this.

"Compromising position, eh?" Pansy's little girl demeanour shifted to reveal the tough cookie beneath. "Kinky!"

"Leave them alone." said Deanna, feeling the need to come to Luella's rescue. "It's not their fault that trouble seems to have a way of following them around. Not Harry's fault that he's on Lord Voldie's hit list." Or Lu's fault that she's destined to kill him, she added mentally.

"Well, be that as it may, I'd like to see how they're going to worm their way out of this one. Killing the caretaker's cat, now that's a new one. Did you see Filch's face?" Lucas grinned, but he was just about the only one.

"It's the writing that got me." said Autumn. "The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Creepy! Does anyone know what it means?" The first year looked quite unnerved. Sitting almost opposite her, Marlie began to feel rather sorry for the kid. She kept forgetting that not everyone was as used to weird and disturbing goings on as she was. Damn you, Lu, she thought. OK, you can't help being what you are, but can't you spare a thought for everyone else around you and at least try to be normal sometimes?

"Well, Enemies of the Heir Beware is a Slytherin war chant." said Pansy. "Don't know what it's got to do with anything though." I mean, who declares war by killing a cat? she thought. You'd have to be really sick to come up with an idea like that. Not Lu Martin's style at all. Then again, her parents did always say that it was the quiet ones you had to watch.

"What *does* an old war chant have to do with a secret chamber and killing Mrs. Norris anyway?" mused Rianne to herself. "Anyone know what it means?"

"The Chamber of Secrets." said Deanna. "I'm sure I've heard of it, you know. Sure I've read it somewhere. If only I could remember where..."

"Shame on you, Tyler." flung in Draco. He'd been fired up ever since seeing Mrs. Norris hanging there, full of energy and life, a complete contrast to his normal languid manner. Marlie couldn't help but wonder whether he was always like this in a crisis. It could make a good Barometer of Weirdness - when Draco Malfoy was actually showing signs of possessing energy, things were getting bad.

"Fancy not knowing your own House's history. Well, that'll change. Soon everyone will. Oh yes. They will." He was pacing the floor, face flushed, eyes dancing, his entire demeanour that of a fanatic, on fire for whatever unholy cause he seemed to have espoused.

Deanna concealed her disquiet. "All very well and good, but rather than prancing around the room like someone's given you a cocaine enema, how about you start now and enlighten the rest of us? Come on. You're clearly dying to tell us exactly what the Chamber of Secrets is and how it relates to Enemies of the Heir, so you might as well get on with it. Hell, it's probably the only time you'll have so many people giving you so much attention without Crabbe and Goyle putting wands to their heads."

Draco ignored the insult, settling down in a chair between Pansy and Autumn, a real one as opposed to one of Marlie's introductions, the firelight illuminating his face as he seemed to change from the Malfoy they all knew into some kind of ancient tribal storyteller. "Gather round then, Slyths. Hear your history, those of you who don't already know it.

"It all began not long after the Founding. As it does today, Hogwarts admitted all children with magical skills, whether their parents were mages or Muggles. And as is the case today, not all were united on whether it was a good idea or not. Not even the Founders. Godric Gryffindor, Muggle-loving fool that he was, was all for letting everyone in. Salazar Slytherin, on the other hand, our proud and noble House Founder, preferred to keep these things in the family, so to speak."

"So they had a fight over it and Salazar lost, and Slytherin House has been tainted ever since." Rianne finished for him. "Malfoy, there's not many of us who don't know that. Get to the interesting bit. This Chamber of Secrets."

"All right, all right, I'm getting there! Let me finish, won't you!" Draco rubbed his forehead, trying to get his train of thought back on track. "Anyway, yes, Salazar Slytherin gets defeated and kicked out. But before he left, he created a hidden chamber, the Chamber of Secrets, somewhere in Hogwarts. And in it, he placed a monster, sealed up and asleep deep within the bowels of the school. Waiting." He paused for dramatic effect.

"Waiting for what?" asked Autumn.

"Waiting for the return of the Heir of Slytherin." said Draco in a voice that sounded almost like a hiss, flinging his head back in triumph. "The Heir of Slytherin, who will

open the Chamber, unleash the horror within and cleanse this school of all who are... unworthy." While he didn't say it, everyone guessed what he meant by unworthy.

Deanna glanced at Rianne, who nodded at her as if to say "Go on." Emboldened, she turned to Malfoy.

"Sounds like a twisted version of the Redemption Prophecy. Everyone knows that there'll be two Heirs and they'll both be of Muggle extraction. Which kind of leaves your pet theory dead in the water, doesn't it?"

Draco glared at her. "What, and you think they'll be benign New Age hippies who'll bring peace and light? Use your eyes, Tyler, the scourge is starting already. It's begun with the familiar of that worthless Squib Filch. Next it'll be the Mudbloods. The time is right. A thousand years since the fall of Slytherin. And fifty years since the last Heir walked amongst us. The Chamber was opened then too, and that time, a Mudblood died. Of course, they stopped the first Heir. Who knows," he leered at them, rubbing his hands in anticipation, "maybe the second will finish the job."

Deanna gripped the arms of her chair, knuckles white as her fingers dug into the vinyl, only just reining in her anger. "She will not!" she raged at him. "She's the Redeemer, she wouldn't!"

Rianne grabbed Deanna's sleeve. "Tyler, quiet!" she whispered. "Don't say anything you shouldn't."

Deanna backed off, glaring at Draco, exuding smugness. However, it wasn't Rianne who stopped the argument from continuing. It was the sound of the door opening.

Luella stepped in, looking distinctly worried. She halted in her tracks as the entire room fell silent and turned to look at her.

"What?" she demanded. "What's up with you lot?"

"How's Mrs. Norris?" asked Draco, that maniacal grin fixed as firmly in place as the cat in question.

"Alive." Luella told them. "Alive, but Petrified. I think Dumbledore's working on a cure."

"What, couldn't you finish the job properly?" Draco's grin finally shifted, but the pout that replaced it wasn't really much of an improvement. "The power of Slytherin behind you and you can't even kill a cat?"

"It wasn't me!" shouted Luella. "I just found her like that!"

"Of course you did, Martin." Draco's voice oozed with syrup, a sweetness that really didn't suit him. "Which is why you looked so guilty when we all found you there with the Three Not-So-Wise Gryffindors. Why were you there anyway?"

Luella hesitated. Don't tell them, Deanna mutely implored her. Make something up, anything. She was not disappointed.

"I didn't feel well, that's all." Why, wasn't it obvious? her body language seemed to say. "I was on my way up to the hospital wing when I found her. Now I'm still not feeling brilliant so I'm going to bed. Goodbye." And with that she stormed off towards the dorm. Deanna gave a private prayer of thanks to any passing deity. However, she couldn't help thinking that Luella of all people should have been able to charm her way out of things rather more adroitly. Typical Lu, really, never thinking to use her powers when they actually would have come in useful.

The Slytherins watched her go in silence. Pansy was first to speak, hands on her hips in indignation.

"She was a mine of information, wasn't she? Is it me or did she look a bit guilty there?"

"She did not look guilty," snapped Deanna. "She was just tired and unwell, and wanted to go to bed. I'm telling you, she didn't do anything to Mrs. Norris! She wouldn't. Lu wouldn't hurt anyone. It's not in her nature. It's not!" But then again, nor was leaving the feast in the way she had... Deanna brushed the thought from her mind and got up, ignoring the disbelieving sneers she was getting from some of her housemates. "I am going to bed. Goodnight, all of you. Coming along, you two?"

Rianne nodded, and hauling a rather nervous-looking Marlie after her, followed Deanna to the dorm.

The gathering broke up after that. Pansy and Draco did not stay long, which just left the two first years and Lucas. Lydia turned to her brother, seeking some answers.

"Is it true?"

"Is what true, sis?" asked Lucas, the long habit of winding up his little sister being a tough one to break. Lydia fought back the urge to slap him.

"Those legends that Malfoy was talking about. There's not really an Heir of Slytherin out to kill all the Muggle-borns, is there?"

"Of course not," said Lucas, surprised than anyone could think otherwise. "Come on, you know Dad reckons all these old Slytherin legends are just a way for Slytherins who didn't make it to justify their failure by blaming it all on someone else. You don't want to pay too much attention to Malfoy either - Dad tells me they're a twisted bunch and always have been. Did Draco look like a sane and normal human being tonight? No. Did he look like one of those idiot Muggles who likes to stockpile weaponry and hide out in the mountains where the government can't find him? Yes. Don't get upset by it, kid. It's just some random nutter with a basic knowledge of Slytherin history and a grudge against Filch wanting to freak us all out. Admittedly, that doesn't really narrow it down a lot, but still, it's a lot more plausible than the idea of the second Heir walking among us wanting to wipe out the Muggle-borns."

"You don't think Lu Martin might be the second Heir, do you?" Autumn whispered.

Lucas burst out laughing. "Her? Never. Far too normal. She's Muggle-born herself anyway, why would she do that? Look, you two stop worrying. Everything'll just blow over, you'll see. You're Slytherins, you're pure-bloods, you're safe. Nothing for you two to worry about. See you both tomorrow." He gave Lydia a reassuring pat on the shoulder and walked out.

Autumn turned to her friend. "Do you believe him?"

"I don't know." Lydia sat huddled up, watching the firelight. "But this I do know - when it comes to seeing a Petrified cat and Draco Malfoy in that weird mood he was in, there's no doubt over who wins in the disturbing stakes. It's Malfoy all the way. Dad's right, the Malfoys are all insane. He was talking about killing Muggle-borns! And enjoying it!"

"Lydia, you're always making patronising comments about Muggle-borns being clueless. According to you, they're slightly less of a target for mockery than Hufflepuffs."

Lydia squirmed in her seat. "That's different."

"How, exactly?" inquired Autumn.

"I might laugh at their cluelessness. I might make fun of them for not knowing all the things you and I take for granted. But I wouldn't want them dead. Malfoy was talking about them like they were subhuman! I don't like him. You know what, I can see why Tyler and Lovegood hate him." She got up to leave. "Come on, let's go to bed, update Ginny on the night's adventures."

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Deanna found Luella standing in front of the dorm mirror, sleeve rolled up to her shoulder, examining her right arm. She dropped the sleeve as soon as she heard the door open, swiftly spinning round. She relaxed on seeing it was only Deanna, but not much.

"Hey, Lu." said Deanna, smiling, trying not to think of how Luella had been acting that evening. "You OK?"

"Yeah, not bad. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." She smiled in return, but Deanna couldn't help thinking that Luella's smile was about as skin-deep as her own.

"Deanna, you don't think it was me, do you?" asked Luella. "Because it wasn't. I swear it!"

"Of course not." said Deanna. "You wouldn't do anything like that. Not even to Mrs. Norris. Ignore Malfoy, he's a little stirrer."

Luella nodded. "Thanks." Her expression turned to a less pleasant one as Rianne and Marlie followed Deanna in. Walking purposefully over to Marlie, she grabbed her by the front of her robes. "Marlie, which part of the phrase 'Don't tell anyone' don't you understand? Catch me using you as a confidant again! Thanks to your inability to keep a secret, I just had a major tongue-lashing from Snape and it was not pleasant!"

"Lu, I'm sorry!" gasped Marlie. "Let me go, please! Lu, you're hurting me!" She wriggled in Luella's grip.

"Lu, what the hell are you doing?" asked Deanna, stunned. She tugged at Luella's arm, in an attempt to dislodge her. Luella ignored her.

"Not nearly as much as you deserve." Luella snarled, releasing Marlie, who staggered backwards, almost falling over until Rianne steadied her. "I suppose you'd go running to your mother then too, wouldn't you?"

"Lu, I'm sorry, I was just trying to help..." faltered Marlie. Luella cut her short.

"Next time, don't. In fact, do me a big favour and stay the hell out of my life entirely." She turned on her heel and walked over to her bed, drawing the curtains behind her in one angry motion.

"What the hell was that all about?" asked Rianne, bewildered.

Marlie shook her head, small and fragile. "Doesn't matter." she said in a tiny, quiet voice, suddenly looking three years younger, as if she'd regressed to her pre-Sleeping Death days. "Just that Lu told me something I was meant to keep quiet, and I told my mother about it. Not important."

"Not important?" said Deanna. "Best friend or no best friend, she was right out of order. I'm going to have a word with her." She turned and headed for Luella's bed. Rianne turned to Marlie.

"Are you really OK, Marls? Because you don't look it."

Marlie didn't reply. She was watching Deanna slide onto Luella's bed, pulling the curtains shut behind her. From behind the curtains came some muffled noises which sounded suspiciously like someone hissing furiously.

"Do you believe it?" she said quietly. "What Malfoy said. About the Heir of Slytherin coming to get rid of anyone with Muggle blood in them."

"I believe the legend may be true. But I don't think that Luella is responsible for what happened tonight." Rianne guided Marlie away from where Deanna and Luella appeared to be reaching some kind of agreement and towards her bed. "Go on, get to bed. Get some sleep. I think we all need it."

Marlie nodded wearily as she crawled into bed. All the same, she couldn't stop thinking about how bizarrely Luella had been acting that night. Granted, it wasn't in

character for her to start exterminating fellow students. But it also wasn't in character for her to physically intimidate her friends...

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Deanna parted the curtains and crawled inside, lighting her wand as she did so. Luella was sitting hunched up, her chin on her knees. She did not look pleased to see Deanna.

"What."

"I want to know what's up." said Deanna, arms and legs folded, looking eerily like Caitlin in the half-light. "I want to know what's going on with you and Marlie. I want to know what's up with your arm. I want to know why you left the feast in such a hurry. Lu, what the hell is going on?"

"Not that easy, Dee." said Luella, a bittersweet smile on her face. "I can't tell you what the row with Marlie's about. Let's just say I told her something that was meant to be between the two of us. As for tonight..." she gestured helplessly. "I don't know! I don't know what's going on. All I know is that there was something calling me tonight. Something summoning me and I couldn't resist it. And I think it was linked with the attack on Mrs. Norris. But I didn't do it." she added, determined to get that one settled straight away. "I didn't! I mean, I know the phrase 'Enemies of the Heir, Beware' is the war chant associated with the Redeemer Prophecy, but I didn't put the words there. I don't even know what the Chamber of Secrets is!"

"It was built by Salazar Slytherin before he left Hogwarts." Deanna informed her. "It's got a monster of some kind in there. The legend goes that it can only be opened by a true Heir of Slytherin, who will then use the power within to cleanse the school of all who are unworthy to study here. It's been opened once before, fifty years ago, when the other Heir of Slytherin was here. Fifty years ago, Lu."

Luella was not slow in grasping the meaning. "Voldemort. Oh my god. He could open the chamber. He did open it. And if he can..."

"Then you probably can too." said Deanna. "Which is why I'm asking, did you?"

Luella shook her head, tears beginning to well up. "No." she whispered. "No, I didn't, I swear. Please, you've got to believe me."

Deanna looked at her, dubious. On the one hand, Luella wouldn't purposely lie to her, surely. But on the other, she was an Heir of Slytherin.

"All right. I believe you. Just one thing. This secret you entrusted Marlie with. Does it have anything to do with ancient Slytherin prophecies, hidden chambers or the systematic eradication of students of Muggle origin?"

Deanna felt her doubts melt away before the smile Luella was giving her, an unforced, glamour-free, true smile. "No. No, it had nothing to do with any of that."

"Good. Well in that case, I'll let you get to sleep. See you in the morning. Don't let them get to you. I'm certain it wasn't you. Night, Lu."

"Night, Deanna." Luella murmured as Deanna crawled back out. She began to strip off her robes and get changed into her pyjamas. However, before crawling into bed, she couldn't resist having one last look at her right arm and the serpentine emblem now emblazoned on her skin.

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Ginny came to with a start. What had happened? Last thing she remembered was reaching for her diary with a splitting headache. Maybe she'd fallen asleep or something. But that didn't explain why she was now standing in the middle of the dorm, clutching the diary in her hand.

It also didn't explain why her hands, sleeves and the front of her robes were covered in red paint.

Paint? How on earth had she managed to get paint all over her? She didn't know, but something told her it wasn't a good idea for her dorm mates to see her like this. Concealing the diary under her pillow, she hastily stripped her robes off and pulled her nightdress and dressing gown on. Next, a Cleaning Charm to sort her hands out. That done, she began stuffing her robes into the laundry basket, infinitely grateful that unlike her mother, house-elves wouldn't ask any awkward questions about how they got that way.

The door opened just as she was closing the laundry basket. Spinning round, she tried not to look guilty as Lydia and Autumn walked in.

"Hi, you two. How was the feast?" That's right, Gin, keep it innocent, keep the conversation normal.

"Hey, Gin. You're up." Lydia pulled up a stool while Autumn perched at the end of her bed. "Join us." She indicated another stool. "Because you're not going to believe what happened tonight!"

Ginny listened in horror as Lydia recounted the night's events.

"Red?" she asked as Lydia described how they'd found the writing on the wall.
"You're sure it was in red?"

"Yes, of course I am." Lydia was not pleased to have her story interrupted over such a trivial detail. "I'm quite capable of telling one colour from another, even in torchlight."

Ginny delicately pulled her dressing gown sleeves over her hands, which still had a reddish tinge to them even now.

"OK, so you found Lu Martin and the three Gryffindors in front of Mrs. Norris and this writing. What happened next?"

She listened as her friend went on to describe the conversation in the common room, and how Malfoy had explained the Chamber of Secrets legend to them.

"They reckon that next time it'll be a student." Lydia tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "Last time round one of the Muggle-borns was killed."

"Killed?" Ginny fought to keep her composure. "Oh my... What's going to happen to us? What's going to happen?"

"Gin, calm down!" Lydia tried to reassure her. "We're all pure-bloods. We're safe at least."

"That's not the point!" said Ginny, fighting the hysteria threatening to get out.

"I think, Lydia, that she doesn't want to see large numbers of Muggle-borns get killed." Autumn intervened. "Think about it, that's half the school! Most of us have got some Muggle ancestry somewhere along the lines."

"It won't come to that." Lydia tried to summon up the legendary Vettinari self-assurance. "Lucas reckons the Malfoys are all nuts, and looking at Draco, I can believe it. Malfoy's just trying to scare us all. Probably just some nutter with a grudge. Yeah, that'll be it."

Autumn did not share her friend's bravado. "He didn't sound like he was joking, Lydia. And he said Lu Martin did it."

"She didn't!" gasped Ginny. Not Luella, surely? "But she's Muggle-born, why would she?"

"Exactly. Honestly, just because her and Potter were the first on the scene, everyone seems to think she's the Heir of Slytherin. I mean, look at her. Does she look like an Heir to you? Of course not. And Gin, you stop worrying. We're not going to have all the Muggle-borns dying on us. Go on, get to bed. It's late, we need sleep. You wait, this time tomorrow we'll all be wondering what on earth all the fuss was about."

Goodnights were exchanged and the other two girls turned in, leaving Ginny on her own, staring at the flakes of red paint under her fingernails.

"It's not me. It can't be." whispered Ginny. But if it wasn't her, why couldn't she remember where she'd been this evening? She needed to think. Needed to get her thoughts in order. Needed to talk to someone impartial, someone who she knew wouldn't tell anyone else. Scrabbling around for a quill, she reached for her diary.

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Nothing was said to Luella's face after that night - the Slytherin fourth years wielded enough collective power to ensure that no one mentioned the subject again. Behind their backs, on the other hand, was a different matter.

It was the Wednesday evening after the Halloween feast, and the Slytherin reserves were in action against their Ravenclaw counterparts. Quite a few Slytherins had turned out to watch, not least because they wanted to see what Marlie was going to do with the team.

Lydia, Autumn and Ginny were watching from the front row.

"They're good, aren't they?" enthused Lydia.

"They are." Autumn, heavily influenced by her older sister, had already decided she was going to play Quidditch for her house one day or die trying. "Especially Tyler - that's the fourth goal she's scored, and the game's only been going on for half an hour. Her and your brother - they're good! They're going to thrash Ravenclaw at this rate."

"Going to?" laughed Lydia. "Thought they were? They're sixty-nil up already."

"It would have been more if my brother were any good. Honestly, he keeps losing the Quaffle, he's a lousy shot, why did Marlie pick him? I could do better than that!" Autumn did not look happy.

"Probably couldn't find anyone else. Don't worry, mate. Next year, you'll be eligible for the team, and then maybe you can persuade Lovegood to try you out. I'll get Lucas to put in a word for you. Better yet, Gin could have a word with her, seeing as she's a friend of the family and all. Gin?"

Ginny sat up, startled. Lydia sighed, exasperated. Much as she had grown fond of Ginny, this habit she had of drifting off into a little world of her own was getting a little annoying.

"Wake up, Gin. This is one of the most exciting games I've seen, not least because we're winning. What's the matter, thought you liked Quidditch?"

"Oh! Yes. Yes, I do." Ginny gazed around, blinking as if she'd just been brought out of a trance. "What's the score?"

"Sixty-nil." said Lydia. Suddenly, Autumn squealed and punched the air, bouncing up and down with joy. Lydia glanced at the scoreboard, currently announcing that Slytherin Chaser No. 4 Tyler had just scored again. "Seventy-nil." Lydia corrected herself.

"That's nice." said Ginny, her mind clearly on other things.

"That's nice???" Lydia stared at her. "We're riding all over them like it's the Wild Hunt, and all you can say is 'that's nice'? What's wrong with you?"

"Lydia, leave her." said Autumn, concentrating on the game, wincing as a Bludger almost unseated Marlie. "She's probably still freaked out by Saturday night. I know I am. Where the hell are our Beaters, that's the third time a Bludger nearly got Lovegood. Tyler's had a fair few go her way too."

"Freaked out? Gin, you weren't even there. It's only Mrs. Norris. No one likes her. I bet it's some seventh years having a practical joke."

"That's not what everyone else is saying." whispered Ginny. "Half the school's going on about the Chamber of Secrets and the Heir of Slytherin, and how all the Muggle-borns'll be next. They seem to think Luella did it. Or Harry."

"Don't be silly, Gin." Lydia dismissed her friend's worries with a wave of the hand. "No way was it Martin. I mean, sure she was there, but she's Muggle-born herself. She wouldn't go around attacking other students, especially not other Muggle-borns. I don't think it was her. As for the Boy Who Lived, no one with a clue seriously thinks it was him, surely?"

"The Hufflepuffs think it was him. I heard some of them in the library talking about it."

"Like I said, no one with a clue seriously thinks it was him. Gin, they're Hufflepuffs. Insight isn't their strong point, lovey. I'm sure they're all good people, but I wouldn't depend on them as an accurate rumour source. Not that there's really any such thing as an accurate rumour source, but the Hufflepuffs are a non-starter however you look at it. And as for the Chamber of Secrets thing, come on! Just some old legend with no basis in reality whatsoever. Someone's using it to freak us all out. Don't let it get to you, Gin."

Ginny didn't look convinced. In fact, she looked even more pale and frightened than before. "Have they found out who did it yet?" she said, her lower lip trembling.

"Not yet. Don't worry, your brother and his mates aren't in trouble. I asked Lucas and he reckons that Snape said Dumbledore doesn't think a student could have done it."

"But if they're the Heir of Slytherin..." Ginny began.

"Gin," said Lydia patiently. "there is no Heir of Slytherin. It's a legend. A story. Made up by some fed up and half-crazy Slytherins who longed for the good old days when we actually had some respect and hoped that some long-lost descendant of Slytherin would turn up and get it back for us. Well, it's not going to happen, Gin. Only way for us to get that respect back is to earn it. There's no Redeemer going to lead us back to glory. Just us doing the best we can. That's what my father says anyway." Lydia sat back with the air of one used to being in the right.

"The Redeemer?" Ginny asked, puzzled. Now that wasn't a term she'd heard used before.

"Another old legend. Says there'll be two Heirs of Slytherin and the second will be called the Redeemer. She'll lead us back to the position that is rightfully ours, or so they say. Don't believe a word of it myself." said Lydia.

Ginny digested the information, looking yet more concerned. "The Redeemer's a girl?"

"Oh yes, all the versions of it agree on that. She hasn't turned up yet though. Don't think she ever will. Come on, there's a fascinating game going on here. Autumn, how are we doing?"

"Eighty-nil. Your brother just scored."

"Did he? Ooh, well done Lucas!" said Lydia, her eyes now glued to the aerial action too. Which is why she didn't notice Ginny reach into her bag and stare at the small, innocent black book lying there, her eyes troubled.

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Lydia and Autumn weren't the only ones transfixed by the game. Not far away, Rianne was also watching avidly, her eyes tracking Lucas, Deanna and Marlie's every move. "Yes! Go Lucas!" she shrieked as the score went up to eighty-nil. "Show those Ravens what you're made of!" She turned to Luella, her face glowing. "He's so talented, isn't he?"

"Absolutely, Ri." said Luella, her mind on other things. "Our reserves rule."

"Try and show a little enthusiasm, Lu. I know you hate the game, but your best mate's playing, you could at least try and look interested. She's doing really well too, five goals to her credit. A cert for the first team when Summer, Kat and Laetitia all leave, I think."

Luella didn't seem to hear her. Rianne looked at her properly and started. Luella looked far from well. Pale, anxious and looking like she'd not slept well for a while, she was not her usual cheerful self.

"You OK, Lu?" Rianne asked, concerned. "Still worried about Saturday?"

Luella nodded.

"Well, don't be. No one seriously thinks you did it. Didn't Dumbledore say it would have taken advanced Dark Magic to do that? You're good, Lu, but you're not that good."

"Try telling that to Ron Weasley. He thinks it was me. I don't blame him. I mean, him, Harry and Mione walked in and found me right there. It looked bad, Ri! Really bad. Ron leaped straight to the obvious conclusion and who can blame him? I'd have thought the same." Luella stared gloomily at her feet. "And unlike the other three, I don't even have a plausible excuse for being there. They were on their way back from some ghost party. What's my excuse? I felt compelled by some weird power to get up and head over there? Yeah, that really makes me sound like a sane, normal, law-abiding member of society, doesn't it?"

Rianne put her arm round her. Luella seemed close to tears. However, she pulled herself together.

"I'm sorry, mate. I don't want to ruin your evening. Let's talk about something more cheerful." Luella dried her eyes and tried to smile. "How's the bet with Marlie going? Got rid of the craving yet?"

"No." muttered Rianne. "Bloody hell, Lu, I preferred it when you were all depressed and weepy on me. Did you have to remind me of it? My god, look at me. It's only been four days if that and already I'm suffering. I can't sleep, can't concentrate on my work, all I can think of is Tetris, Tetris, Tetris. Help me, Lu!" She looked at her friend, wild-eyed.

"It's only a game, Ri. You'll cope without it, I'm sure. Three more days and you'll have done a whole week."

"Only a week!" moaned Rianne. "It feels like years. Gods..." She seemed to come to a decision. "Right. That does it. I can't go on like this and I definitely can't live without my Tetris. I'll have to cheat. Lu, that Dicta-Quill of yours. Can it be re-programmed to do someone else's handwriting? Marlie's, for instance."

"Rianne! That's unethical. Forget it. I am not helping you forge a letter to Marlie's father to get him to send Tetris up here. No. Out of the question. Stop looking at me like that. It won't get you anywhere."

Rianne was giving Luella her best innocent and wide-eyed please-take-pity-on-me look.

"Please? I'm really suffering here. It's horrible! You don't want me to start going nuts, do you? You don't want to see me make a fool of myself on a broom, do you?"

"Make a fool of yourself? You won't. You can actually fly. You're better than me, for a start."

"Lu, please don't think I'm being catty or anything here, but Neville Longbottom's toad is better at flying than you. No offence. Besides, it's not the forfeit that bothers me! It's the withdrawal symptoms. Do you know that last night I had a dream about falling blocks?" said Rianne, a sense of urgency and desperation in her voice. Luella was reminded of the time they'd had a coffee tasting session involving all the unusual and extra-strong ones from Sainsbury's, an experience which had left all of them determined never to touch the stuff again. Rianne's eyes had that same dilated appearance, and any minute now, Luella expected her to start developing that nervous twitch down her left side again.

"I gathered that." said Luella, beginning to grin. "You were screaming 'NO! Not the s-shaped ones!' in your sleep."

Rianne blushed. "Was I? Oops. Sorry. Er, the others didn't hear me did they?"

"I'm pretty certain Deanna didn't. Trust me, you'd have heard all about it if she had - she hates being woken up. As for Marlie, nothing short of full volume Metallica in her ears wakes her up once she's asleep."

"You sound like you've tried."

"Deanna and I carried out an experiment once. It was a weekend, and you'd got up early for this 'study session' with Lucas Vtinari, or so you claimed."

"I was studying!" protested Rianne.

"Hmm." said Luella, sceptical but not pushing the point. "Anyway, we tried various methods, including tickling the feet, pushing, shoving, stealing the bedclothes and saying in loud voices 'Did you hear about Fred Weasley? Got caught snogging Angelina Johnson in Professor Binns's lesson.' but to no avail. Only thing that worked was playing the Black Album on her Walkmage at full volume. How ironic that a track about the Sandman is the only thing that'll wake her up."

Rianne laughed. "Poor old Marls. Tormented by her own invention. Mind you, thanks to her inventiveness, she's not the only one suffering. Damn her for adapting that Game Boy and double damn her for making this challenge for me. Lu, are you sure you won't help me forge a letter to her father? We can do it tonight, we'll have the dorm to ourselves, they'll both be off celebrating their win. Please?"

"No." said Luella firmly. "Firstly, it's cheating. Secondly, they'll notice if we aren't around to help them celebrate. And most important of all, Marlie's almost certainly told her father not to send Tetris back unless he gets a letter from her with codewords known only to the two of them in it. Sorry, Stormer. Not going to happen."

"Oh." Rianne tried to put a brave face on her troubles. "Never mind. I can cope. I can manage. It's just a few weeks after all. Just a few weeks."

"Keep saying it often enough, and you might start to believe it." said Luella, smiling to herself as she turned her attention to the game. As she did so, all the Slytherins leapt to their feet cheering as Marlie swooped down between two Ravenclaw Chasers, let go of the broom and, swinging sideways so she was hanging almost upside down, neatly plucked the Snitch out of the sky, leaving the other Seeker grasping at empty air.

Even a Quidditch-phobe like Luella couldn't help applauding a move like that, as Rianne squealed and hugged her. However, in the row behind, there was one Slytherin not applauding. A Slytherin who hadn't even seemed to notice there was a game going on at all. A Slytherin who was now looking very, very thoughtful.

Draco Malfoy was going over all he had just heard, giving it careful analysis. Not the discussions on how to wake up Marlie Lovegood or about the bet - after all, if two Slytherins had a bet going on, there had to be cheating at some point. It was almost an unwritten law. The only reason it wasn't in the Slytherin Code of Honour was because the writers had thought it too obvious to mention. He was far more interested in the first part of the conversation, the part referring to Halloween.

His father's words before he left for Hogwarts came back to him. "If anything strange starts happening at school this year, anything at all, especially involving that Mudblood Luella Martin, I want to know about it. Understand?" Well, this certainly

qualified as strange, even by Hogwarts standards. Ignoring the cheering going on all around him, he got up and walked purposefully back to the Slytherin common room.

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A week after the attack, and most of the Slytherins seemed to have put it out of their minds. A Quidditch match against Gryffindor had a way of focusing people's attention.

"Do you think we'll win?" Deanna asked Marlie.

"I don't know." replied Marlie. "I've been watching the first team in training and Malfoy's not a bad Seeker."

"Doesn't sound good."

"Ah, but there's a world of difference between 'not bad' and 'heartstoppingly wonderful'. He's not as good as me. For example, I've yet to see him master the Corkscrew Manoeuvre." The Corkscrew Manoeuvre was a particularly tricky stunt that was one of Marlie's favourites, involving riding one's broom upside down while heading for the Snitch, catching it then righting oneself. It never failed to impress and routinely frightened the opposition.

"Marlie, no one's mastered that one, primarily because it's a bloody nightmare to do. Besides, I'm not asking whether he's as good as you. I'm asking if he's as good as Harry."

"He could be. If he could sort out that obsession he has with him. It'll ruin his game. I think the Gryffs'll do it. Today."

"Is that good?"

"Officially, no. For our purposes, absolutely." A crafty smile crept across Marlie's face. "If he loses the Snitch today, our position is that much strengthened."

"Especially after last Wednesday's game. What was the score in the end?"

"Two hundred and thirty to nil. I'm not happy though."

"Why not?" asked Deanna, confused. "Call me ignorant if you will, but that's a pretty good score in my view."

"It's not the score. It's the team." Marlie sounded like she meant business.

"What about the team?"

"The Chasers are two-thirds wonderful, one-third adequate. The Keeper is excellent. The Beaters are letting the side down. I got the official stats off Madam Hooch the other day. You and I had more Bludgers go for us than the rest of the field combined. Our Beaters are not doing their job properly, Deanna."

Deanna looked down the table at Crabbe and Goyle, who were busy having some kind of food fight. Exactly what you didn't want to see over breakfast.

"Marlie, surely you're not accusing Crabbe and Goyle of sabotaging our progress because of some petty grudge against us? They wouldn't stoop so low, would they?" Deanna looked at Crabbe and Goyle again. "What am I saying, of course they would."

"I know, I know." sighed Marlie. "Honestly, all we did was get their sibs expelled. From the way they're acting, anyone would have thought we'd done something really awful, like spilling red wine on their best white shirts or something."

"Nice to know you've got your priorities right, Marls. But what do we do about it?"

Marlie's confidence deserted her. "I don't know. I need to find some way of bargaining with them. Some way of getting them in line. As it is, the only weapon I've got is threatening to drop them and they know as well as I do that there's not really anyone else to take their place. Damn."

"Well, even when they're not co-operating, we can still beat any reserve team in the school, can't we? Can't we?"

"And when we're all on the first team and they're Beaters then?" Marlie reached gloomily for her orange juice. "I need to find a way of bringing them in line. And soon."

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, Luella was chatting to Rianne.

"How are the cravings? Any better?"

"No." snarled Rianne.

"Still having the dreams?"

"Yes. And they're getting worse. I dreamt I was getting chased around Hogwarts by a selection of giant Tetris blocks all chanting 'Blocks are gonna get you! Blocks are gonna get you!' They finally cornered me in the Potions lab."

"Then what happened?" asked Luella, fascinated.

"Snape came out and dispersed them. I turned to thank him, but... he... his head..." Rianne buried her head in her hands "I can't take much more of this!"

Luella brushed Rianne's hair out of her face in a simple, intimate gesture. "Poor thing. It's getting pretty bad, isn't it?"

"Horrible. I keep seeing blocks everywhere. Anything with right angles in it brings them to mind. I spent two hours staring at the dorm room wall yesterday because the brickwork reminded me of Tetris structures." She turned to look at Luella, wild-eyed. "Help me. Please! I feel like I'm losing my mind..."

Ethics and compassion began fighting a war of opposites in Luella's mind, brought swiftly to an end when compassion caught ethics in a headlock and rammed her repeatedly against a wall until she submitted.

"All right." she heard herself saying. "All right. We'll skip the match, we'll say we need to study. Everyone'll believe that, we're not big Quidditch fans, either of us."

"Speak for yourself, love! But if it'll help me hold on to my sanity, I'll do it."

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Luella closed the door behind her. Deanna and Marlie, while raising their eyebrows in that infuriating way that only Slytherins can, hadn't made any objections, just a few comments on Quidditch-phobia and how it could be easily cured by hypnotherapy these days. Rianne and Luella had gritted their teeth and smiled, but it hadn't been a complete waste of time. Because it had given Luella an idea.

"So what exactly are you going to do then?" inquired Rianne.

"Going to use a bit of the old Glamoury on you. Muggles have something similar for use with treating hang-ups and compulsions. My dad tried it when he was giving up smoking ages ago. Can't believe I didn't think of it myself - I did exactly the same thing for Marls when she lost her Quidditch nerve back in the first year." Luella sat down on her bed, beckoning for Rianne to join her.

"This doesn't hurt, does it?" asked Rianne as she took a seat alongside Luella.

"Of course not. You won't feel a thing. All you need to do is just look into my eyes, breathe deeply, and just relax. That's right, just relax, let it all go." crooned Luella, as Rianne began to look a little less anxious. Confident that Rianne was ready, Luella switched on the power. "Feel your cravings disappear. Feel your need for Tetris vanish. The blocks don't bother you. The thought of playing a Game Boy is far from your mind. Your life is your own again. You're free of your addiction. You're..." Luella took a moment to look at Rianne, expecting to see her in the familiar blank-eyed trance. It was quite a shock therefore to see Rianne looking back at her perfectly clearly with a slightly bemused look on her face.

"Well? You started yet?"

"Of course I've started!" snapped Luella. "You're meant to be in a trance at the moment! What's wrong with you?"

"Oh. You mean that's it? I must say, Lu, if that's Glamoury in action, I'm rather disappointed. I was led to believe it was some kind of all-powerful force that could have people prostrating themselves at your feet."

Luella started pacing the floor, beside herself. "Why isn't it working? I wasn't doing anything different. It's always worked before! I mean, Marlie and Deanna go under like a shot." She spun back to face Rianne. "What's wrong with me?"

"Well, maybe it's just the hypno-thingy's not working. Try your invisibility."

Luella nodded once and started walking across the room. Rianne's eyes never left her. As Luella turned back to face her, Rianne just shook her head.

"Nope. You're still very much there. Try something else."

"OK, OK. I'll try for adoration." Leaning back against one of the posts of Marlie's bed, Luella went for her strongest 'worship me' effect.

"How's this?" she purred.

"No good. You look like a tart."

Luella's mood deflated. "Oh. All right then. What about fear?" She pounced onto Deanna's bed, trying her 'beware' pose. At least, she tried it until Rianne started laughing.

"What?" Luella screamed at her. "Stop laughing at me! I mean it!"

"Sorry." giggled Rianne. "It's just that... you... trying to look scary..." She went off into another fit of laughter.

Luella folded her arms, sulking. "Cut it out! How am I meant to concentrate on anything with you laughing at me!"

Rianne dried her eyes. "Sorry, mate. Maybe you're having an off day or something."

"Glamourers do not *have* off days! Caitlin says the power is constant. It has never failed before, ever. Granted I don't use it much, but even so! What's wrong with me, Ri?"

Seeing her friend so depressed brought Rianne's laughter to an end. Getting up, she went to comfort her.

"Hey, don't worry, Lu. I'm sure there's a perfectly good reason for this. Look, why don't we go and join the game, see how it's going. Take your mind off things. Then, afterwards, you can try out your powers on some unsuspecting person and see what happens. It'll be OK, Lu. You're the Redeemer after all, and Slytherin Redeemers do not simply lose their powers just like that. Come on. Let's go." She helped Luella to her feet and led her out. Luella, too shocked to do anything, acquiesced.

"I'll tell you what, though." Rianne mused as she accompanied her friend out of the Serpents' Nest. "Your Glamoury may not have worked, but you've done me some good. You've taken my mind off Tetris."

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A few hours later and the Slytherins were gathered in their common room analysing the match. Most were in a less than cheerful mood. Apart, that is, from Marlie and Deanna.

"Where is he?" asked Marlie, her eyes scanning the room. "I want to be the first to congratulate him."

The common room door flew open.

"Don't look now, Marls," murmured Deanna, "but I think this might be them just coming in."

She was proved right immediately as Draco Malfoy staggered into the room, closely followed by Flint, who did not look happy.

"Look, how many times do you want me to apologise?" snapped Draco. "I'm sorry, all right?"

"Sorry won't get us our points back, will it?!" raged Flint. "Sorry won't give us the edge against Gryffindor, will it? Catching the Snitch when it's virtually next to you, on the other hand, now that'll win us points. What with you being Seeker and all. Do I have to sit you down and explain the rules of this Quidditch thing to you again?"

"OK, OK, you've made your point." Draco muttered. "I won't do it again."

"Bloody right you won't. Make that kind of stupid mistake again and you'll be off the team, brand new racing brooms or no brand new racing brooms." Flint threw up his hands in exasperation. "Come back Marlie, all is forgiven. Your cousin may have had a bit too much sympathy for the opposing team, Malfoy, but at least she knew what she was doing. More than I can say for you."

Draco didn't answer. He was already walking off, the look on his face indicating than anyone who dared even mention Quidditch would be for it. Marlie and Deanna were waiting for him.

"Well, well, well, it's our new little Seeker star." drawled Marlie. "How did you find it? Not as easy as it looks, is it?"

"That'd be down to your skill and talent, Marls. Making it look so effortless must have given Malfoy here a false idea of what it really involved."

"I gathered that." Marlie had dropped all pretence of charm and gone straight into full-blown sarcasm. She dangled her Snitch necklace in front of him. "See this, Malfoy? This is called a *Golden Snitch*. Your job is to *catch* the Golden Snitch. That's because you're a *Seeker*."

"Shut up, Lovegood." Draco flung himself into a nearby antique mahogany chair. "I've heard it all from Flint several times over. And you can stop smirking too, Tyler."

"Me? Smirk? Never. I wouldn't dream of taking delight in your misfortune, Malfoy."

"Makes a bloody change." Draco muttered.

"You showing yourself up because you're not up to the job, on the other hand, is fair game." Deanna was lounging back in an armchair, feet on the table, arms behind her head, grinning as she'd never grinned before. "Looks like talent is the one thing money can't buy, eh Lovegood?"

Marlie and Deanna both started laughing. Draco got up, seething.

"When you've both quite finished mocking me...!"

"Us? Finished?" Marlie's eyes widened.

"Not yet, Malfoy. Give us a bit longer, until we've exhausted all the possibilities for humour and no longer find it amusing."

"So, a few weeks then."

"Maybe a month."

"Or two."

"Or three."

"Or more."

"All term."

"All year."

"Next year, that is."

The two girls both dissolved into fits of laughter. Draco could take no more.

"I hate you two! You're always picking on me, it's not fair!" He stamped his feet and folded his arms in a huff, causing the two girls to snigger even more.

"Aw, is ickle Drakie-wakie all upset?" Deanna pulled her best motherly expression. Marlie was not slow to catch on.

"Ahhh, do that horrid Deanna Tyler and that nasty Marlie Lovegood keep picking on you? Aww, come here, Drakie-poo, tell Mummy all about it."

"Leave me alone." snapped Draco, storming off in a sulk, heading for Pansy Parkinson and some guaranteed sympathy. Marlie and Deanna exchanged guilty looks before the urge to snigger overwhelmed them.

"Do you think we perhaps went a bit too far there?" asked Deanna.

Marlie shook her head. "Nah. Come on, he can hardly accuse us of always picking on him when the vast majority of fights between us are the ones he starts. And if he's going to act like a toddler, he can't complain when we treat him like one. Anyway, did you see the look on his face?"

Deanna nodded, drying her eyes. "Poor baby. He's going to kill us. Ah, but it was worth it!"

Marlie leaned back in her beanbag. "It so was! Deanna, we may have just lost to Gryffindor, but I'll tell you this. This is one of the best nights of my life!"

Someone who was having a less than enjoyable night was Luella.

"I'm telling you Rianne, if my powers really have gone, I don't know what I'm going to do." She was sitting on a small green foot stool in a quiet corner of the common room, hunched up and staring morosely into space. Rianne was crouched next to her, trying to cheer her up.

"I'm sure you're not. I'm sure there's some perfectly reasonable explanation for what happened earlier."

"Sure there is. I'm losing my powers. It's as simple as that."

"You are not!" Rianne told her. "Has Caitlin said anything to you at any time about the possibility of losing your powers?"

"No." Luella admitted.

"There. See? If there was a chance, no matter how small, Caitlin would have told you. Anyway, you're..." Rianne looked around to check that no one was listening and lowered her voice. "You're the Redeemer. You can't lose your powers, not yet. You've got a destiny to fulfil."

Luella didn't answer. Her thoughts had shifted straight to the mark now decorating her arm. She didn't know for sure, but she strongly suspected that it might have something to do with the sudden failure of her Glamoury powers. However, she didn't dare confide this to Rianne.

"Maybe last year was it." Luella said softly. "Maybe he's really gone now."

"I doubt it. Anyway, that doesn't explain how three-quarters of the school still think we're scum, does it? I wouldn't call the end of last year a Redemption of Slytherin, would you? No, there's only one thing for it." Rianne got up and hauled Luella to her feet. "You're going to have to try out your powers on some unsuspecting stooge and see what happens."

"You what? Ri, that's unethical."

"It's not unethical. It's just a little test. No harm in that. Now, I notice we're almost out of sausage rolls, so you'd better talk Mike into fetching some more from the kitchen. Go on, he's over there chatting to Kat. I'll get us in, then you turn on the charm. Come on."

Luella found herself being dragged over to where the blond Beater was complaining to Kat about Malfoy's performance.

"Honestly, bloody awful, even I could have spotted the Snitch from there. Marlie wouldn't have made that mistake, I'm tellin' ya - oh, hello. What do you two want?"

"Hi, Rianne. Everything OK?" Kat asked, smiling warmly at her sister.

"Yes, thanks. We just wanted a word with Mike here. I couldn't help noticing that there's no sausage rolls left. Any chance you could slip off to the kitchens and grab some more for us?"

"Not a hope in hell." yawned Mike. "I'm quite happy here, thanks. Anyway, it's getting late, and if I get caught, there'll be hell to pay. Even if I am a Prefect."

"Oh." said Rianne, disappointed. "Please?"

"No."

Rianne turned to Luella, giving her a meaningful look. "Lu, you have a go."

Luella pulled herself together, took a deep breath and went for it. Here it was. The moment of truth. Did she still have what it took?

"Go on, Mikey." she coaxed, giving her best smile, and turning on the power for all she was worth. "You know you want to. You'd love to get us some more food, wouldn't you? You do really. In fact, you'd like nothing better."

Mike stared blankly at her, going straight into the familiar trance. Shaking himself, he soon snapped out of it, his manner now brisk and efficient.

"Right. Let's get on with it then. Sausage rolls, was it? Right you are. See you all soon. I won't be long." With that, he turned and left the common room.

Kat turned to look at the two fourth years in amazement. "How on earth did you do that?"

"Natural charm." said Luella, praying that Kat wouldn't probe too deeply.

"Yeah, Lu's really persuasive. Don't know how she does it." Rianne added.

"Well, I wish you'd teach me. That was amazing!" Kat seemed in awe. "Anyway, be seeing you both." She wandered off to chat to Summer.

Rianne turned to Luella. "See? That worked like a dream. You've clearly got what it takes still."

"Yeah." Luella tried to fathom out what was going on. "So why didn't it work on you? I could feel the power going, I was doing everything I did with Mike just then. So why didn't it have any effect on you?"

Rianne shrugged. "No idea, Lu. But I'm wondering whether it isn't you but me."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Kat seemed really impressed. And it was impressive seeing Mike suddenly change his mind so quickly. But I didn't see anything special in what you did. No power or anything. Just you smiling and telling him what to do. I mean, Marlie can do that."

"Doesn't send the other person into a trance though, does it?"

"No. That's a definite magical power of yours. So why wasn't I affected? I know you were aiming it at Mike, but according to Caitlin, others around you can sense the use of the power and will be affected by it in lesser ways. Not me, though."

It began to dawn on Luella what Rianne was talking about. "Ri, are you saying you could be immune somehow?"

"Why not? Stands to reason it might not work on everyone. Maybe I'm one of those it doesn't affect."

Luella digested the information. It had never occurred to her that there might be people out there that Glamoury didn't work on. Caitlin had never mentioned the possibility. But then again, she'd never asked her. And it was a far less disturbing prospect than the idea that her powers might be failing.

"Maybe. Maybe. I'll have to run it by Caitlin, see what she thinks, but yeah, that's not a bad idea! Blimey, I'd better watch it around you from now on."

"What, you mean you weren't before?" grinned Rianne.

"No, you always seemed so harmless - argh!" Luella clutched her arm in pain.

"Lu? Lu, what is it? Are you all right?" Rianne's voice was filled with concern as she reached out to her friend.

"Yeah." gasped Luella. "Yeah, I'm OK. Just my arm hurting. Just let me sit down out of the way, I'll be fine."

"You don't look fine! In fact, you look like you're in agony." Rianne led Luella over to the other side of the common room, pulling up a chair for her. In the noise and chatter that was the Serpents' Nest post-Quidditch match, no one noticed. Rianne waited as Luella sat down, clutching her right arm, her face contorted in pain.

"Lu, talk to me. What is it? Don't tell me you're fine, you're clearly not! What's with your arm?"

"Nothing!"

"Doesn't look like nothing to me. Here, let me look."

"NO!" yelled Luella. "I mean, no. No, it's all right. Don't fuss, Ri. I'll be all right."

"Do you want to go to the hospital wing?"

"No! No, I told you, I'll be fine. Just leave it."

Rianne looked sceptical. "Well, if you're sure... If it gets any worse though, I'm taking you straight to Madam Pomfrey."

Luella nodded, unable to summon up the strength to say anything more. Rianne didn't force her to talk, just sat with her, waiting for Luella to recover. The minutes ticked by. The pain seemed to ease a little, but Luella still looked far from happy. In fact, as time went by, she began to fidget, eyes anxiously flitting around the room.

"What? Lu, what is it? Talk to me, what's going on?" Rianne was feeling a little panicky herself by this stage.

"Something's happening. Something bad. Don't know what, but something really evil is happening somewhere."

"Right." Rianne got to her feet, her mind made up. "That's it. No more messing around. Hospital wing. Come on."

"No! No, I'm not going! Ri, there is absolutely no need!"

"Don't give me that, if you looked any unhealthier, you'd be Gothic Babe of the Week. Come on! We're going."

Despite her protestations, Luella found herself dragged to her feet.

"Rianne, let me go, please! I'm fine, put me down, I mean it - argh!" The pain in her arm reached a sudden crescendo. Luella sank to her knees, her eyes watering. Rianne let her go immediately and dropped to her side, shaking her.

"Lu. Lu, talk to me! Lu?"

Luella's breath was coming in ragged gasps as she fought to get some semblance of equilibrium back.

"God, that really hurt."

"You're telling me!" Rianne was staring at her as if she'd gone mad. Which, to be honest, probably wasn't far off the mark. "What's happening?"

"Don't know. But whatever it is, it's gone. The pain's gone." Using Rianne as balance, Luella slowly hauled herself back to her feet. "It's gone."

"Sure? I mean, are you sure it's gone?"

"Yeah." Luella shook herself. "Yeah, it's gone. Just tingling a bit, that's all."

Rianne still seemed wary. "Lu, you are really starting to worry me. I'm sure you're not up to anything, but I'm equally sure you are acting very strangely. Is there something you want to tell me? Something you want to get off your chest?"

Luella bit her lip, torn. Should she tell Rianne everything or not? On the one hand, she was desperate to talk to someone. On the other, she was terrified of how Rianne might react. In the end, she decided to opt for obfuscation.

"I don't know. I really don't. All I do know is that a lot of weird things have been happening lately. And when bizarre things start happening in my life, it usually means trouble."

"You can say that again." sighed Rianne. "I don't know how you deal with it sometimes. You-Know-Who last year, and Gods-Know-What this year."

"Who'd be me, eh?" laughed Luella, trying to put a brave face on things. "Wonder what a quiet life's like. Wouldn't mind trying it one of these days."

"You'd be bored within minutes. Come on." Rianne led Luella over to the buffet table. "Let's get you some food, calm your nerves. You look like you could do with it."

Food. Now that was an appealing prospect. Giving in, Luella let herself be led where Rianne willed.

A pair of brown eyes watched them go. Pansy Parkinson, head tilted to one side like a forgotten childhood toy's, was standing there, expertly plucked eyebrows raised in wonder. And judging from the smile playing around lips not coloured by anything other than human hands, she had heard every word.

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Ten minutes later, and Luella was almost back to normal. It was amazing what chocolate biscuits and a cup of tea could do for one's mood.

"Feeling better?" Rianne asked her.

Luella nodded. "Much better. Thanks, Ri. I appreciate it."

"Hey, what are friends for? You needed help. I gave it to you. It's as simple as that. Of course, I'm also sure that there is a lot more going on that you're not telling me about, but because I'm a friend of yours, I'm not going to pry. I'm just going to let you tell me in your own time, when you're ready."

"If only it were that simple." sighed Luella.

"If it was simple, it wouldn't be happening to you. You are not fated for a quiet, simple life. But Lu, please do one thing for me."

"What?" Luella asked, her heart sinking. Rianne's expression combined concern with a certain firmness that wouldn't take no for an answer.

"If things get any worse, go and talk to Professor Snape. Or Caitlin. Anyone. Just don't keep it to yourself. You're not alone in this, you know!"

"How bizarre. You were the most reluctant to be involved in this whole thing, and now you're saying you want to help me?"

"Don't be like that, Lu. I know I wasn't overwhelmed by the idea, but I do care about you. I do!" Rianne squeezed Luella's shoulder, a simple gesture of comradeship that touched Luella more than mere words would have. Smiling, she patted Rianne's hand.

"Thank you. It's nice having you on side."

"Yes, isn't it. Now, this promise you were going to make. That if things get any worse, you're going to talk to Professor Snape. Well?"

Luella squirmed. Talking to Snape really didn't appeal, especially not given their recent history. Then there was the nagging fear that this time he wouldn't support her. That this time, he'd either be unable to help, or back away from her, repulsed. And yet, she didn't want to have to lie to Rianne...

Fortunately, she was saved from having to reply by the sound of the common room door bursting open. As one, the entire room fell silent, turning to look.

Mike Lovegood rushed back in, his face pale. No sausage rolls in sight. Instead, he slammed the door shut and turned to face his fellow Slytherins.

"No one is to leave the Serpents' Nest tonight for any reason whatsoever." he announced to them all.

The entire room erupted in cries of protest.

"What?" "Why on earth not?" "Who died and made you Headmaster?"

Mike motioned for silence. "Never mind all that. Point is, no one's leaving until morning. I ran into Snape just now."

The room fell silent. Professor Snape rarely imposed direct commands on them - it wasn't his style and they all knew it.

Marlie was first to speak up. "Yeah, and? What did he say? Why are we all confined here? It's not that late, not really." It was quarter to ten in the evening, and only the

first four years were subject to curfew, the fifth and sixth years being allowed out until ten, and the seventh years until eleven.

"Because..." Mike took a deep breath, as if to brace himself for the giving of bad news.
"There's been another attack."

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Chapter Nine Trouble Brewing

Luella immediately turned to Rianne.

"No. Ri, no!" she whispered, the colour draining out of her face. Rianne immediately put a protective arm round her.

"Lu. It'll be all right. You're safe. You were with me all day, no one'll dare accuse you."

Luella wasn't comforted. Trembling, she allowed Rianne to pull her into an embrace, resting her head on her shoulder as Rianne tried to soothe her.

All around them, the initial silence had dissolved into whispers, anxious, tense whispers. An attack on Mrs. Norris could be dismissed as the work of someone with a grudge against Filch - as Lucas Vetinari was fond of saying, not exactly a small group of people. A second attack, however, was not so easily dealt with.

"Another attack? Who? Not one of us!" breathed Laetitia Vetinari. Mike shook his head.

"No. A Gryffindor first year. Colin Creevey."

Blank looks were exchanged, along with quite a few sighs of relief now that they knew it was only a Gryffindor who'd been attacked.

"Who's Colin Creevey?" Goyle was heard asking.

"Potter's Stalker." Draco replied, seemingly unaffected by the news. "You know, that idiot with the camera who's always following him around."

"Potter? What, Harry Potter?"

Draco turned to see who had spoken. Pansy.

"No, Pansy, I'm talking about the less well known Dave Potter, a plumber from Liverpool. Yes of course Harry Potter, who did you think I meant?"

"Interesting that Harry Potter's one of the first on the scene when the first attack happens, and now his stalker gets it in the neck the second time round." Pansy purred.

Unfortunately for her, Deanna overheard her.

"Don't be an idiot, Pansy. Harry Potter, of all people, dabbling in the Dark Arts? Professor Dumbledore's more likely to be behind it than Harry! Still, at least you're not accusing Lu anymore."

"Hey, that's a thought. Where is Martin anyway?"

"She's over here." Rianne's voice cut through the backdrop of whispering that was now going on as every Slytherin was discussing the attack with every other Slytherin. "With me. Where she's been *virtually all day*." Pansy shrank back from the look Rianne was giving her, a silent, frozen dare to contradict her.

"She could have slipped off without you noticing—" Pansy suddenly became aware that both Deanna and Rianne had moved in on her, cutting her off from her friends and cornering her. "No, you're right, of course it wasn't her, couldn't possibly have been her, she's far too nice, what was I thinking of?" She fluttered her eyelashes, giving her most charming look.

"Good." Deanna's voice was not one to be messed with. "Let's keep it that way, hmm? Come on, Rianne." The two older Slytherins moved off, picking up Marlie and Luella on the way and returning to their dorm.

Blaise and Millicent went to Pansy's aid.

"Are you all right, Pansy?" Blaise asked her.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'll be fine." Pansy glared at the retreating Slytherins. "They won't be though. Not if there's any justice in the world. I've got a score to settle with that lot still. Where's Draco gone, I need to talk with him." Her eyes narrowing, she scanned the room for any sign of Malfoy. "That Mudblood's hiding something. And I'm not giving up until I find out what it is."

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The fourth year dorm room proved to be something of a microcosm of the Slytherin common room that night. Luella seemed too stunned to say anything, trembling all over. Rianne was sitting with her, one arm round her shoulders, trying her best to comfort her but not succeeding. Deanna was pacing the floor, running her fingers through her hair, thinking hard. While Marlie was lying back on her bed, cradling Snowy in her arms, her eyes fixed firmly on Luella with a look on her face that could best be described as calculating.

"There has to be a link here, there has to be." Deanna was saying, furiously racking her brains. "What do Mrs. Norris and Colin Creevey have in common?"

"Not a hell of a lot." replied Marlie. "One's loathed by almost everyone, the other's too obscure to be hated. There's only one common factor I can think of and it's a tenuous one at that."

"Well, any light you can cast on the subject would be most welcome, Marls."

"Mrs. Norris belongs to a Squib. A wizard with no magic. While Colin Creevey is a Squib in reverse - a Muggle who can do magic. There's this non-magic connection here, isn't there?"

"What are you getting at, Marls?"

Marlie's eyes did not leave Luella for a minute. "I'm beginning to wonder if my cousin might not have had a point."

Deanna was not slow to grasp Marlie's meaning. "Elaborate, Lovegood. And might I just add that I'm not sure I like where this particular line of conversation is going."

"Just that we've had two attacks now, same circumstances, same *modus operandi*, both victims Petrified, both attacks taking place late at night when the rest of the school is elsewhere. And the only thing that links the victims is that in the eyes of certain mages, they're a disgrace to the magical community." Marlie turned to Deanna, her face showing no emotion whatsoever. "I can't help thinking that maybe Malfoy was right. That maybe this Chamber of Secrets thing is more than a legend. Maybe there really is an Heir of Slytherin plotting to wipe out the Muggle-borns."

"Your point being?" The look on Deanna's face could have bored through steel. One outside her inner circle would have backed off under the weight of it. Not Marlie.

She turned back to look at Luella.

"So who do we know who's an Heir of Slytherin then?"

Luella raised her eyes to look at Marlie. While she looked drained and tired, there was no shock there. It was left to Deanna and Rianne to show that particular emotion.

"Marlie!" Deanna snapped. "Take that back, it was not Lu! I'm sure of it. She gave me her word she hadn't done it, she wouldn't lie to me! Would you, Lu?"

Luella shook her head. However, it was Rianne who answered.

"Marlie, I said it to Pansy and I'm saying it to you. Luella has not left my sight all day. It is not her behind all this. I would stake my reputation on it."

"You mean, she hasn't left your sight as far as you know." countered Marlie. "Come on, Rianne! You know what she's capable of! All she'd have to do is put you under a Glamoury trance and she'd be able to walk away without you even knowing she'd gone!"

"When you've finished talking about me as if I'm not here." Luella cut in. "I did not use Glamoury on Rianne. Truth is, I can't use Glamoury on her. It doesn't work on her. I don't know how or why, but she's immune to it. Aren't you?"

Rianne nodded. "True. Lu really did give it her best shot, but to no avail. She didn't slip away using Glamoury, I'd swear to that."

"Really." Marlie oozed scepticism. "Prove it."

Luella got up. "All right." She walked over to the fire. "You all see me?"

They nodded.

"Now you don't."

Deanna and Marlie gasped as she faded from view. While they both knew that Luella could make herself invisible using her powers, they'd never actually seen it done before. Never realised how impressive it actually looked.

Rianne, however, just smiled, her eyes not leaving the spot where Luella had been.

"This one does." Her eyes started travelling along the length of the dorm room, evidently following Luella's progress. Then back again, before stopping in front of Marlie's bed. Then moving on again, coming to a rest in front of Deanna.

"Hold out your hand, Tyler. Lu's got a present for you."

Deanna did so, bemused.

"No, other hand. To the left. No, too far. Yes, that's it."

Deanna shrieked as another hand came down over hers. Luella returned to view instantly, grinning at her friend. Removing her hand, she let Deanna look at what she was now holding. Marlie's annotated copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*.

"You little tea-leaf." laughed Deanna, tossing the book back to its stunned owner. She turned to Rianne. "You could see her, couldn't you?"

"Of course. Didn't see her so much as flicker. Just saw her walk to the other end of the room, back to Marlie's bed, pick up the book and then walk over to Deanna with it. I'm telling you, it doesn't work for me! At all. There's no way Lu could have sneaked off without my knowing. It's not her, Marls."

Marlie still looked dubious. "But if it's not her then who? She's an Heir of Slytherin. Only an Heir of Slytherin can open the Chamber and it does look like that's what's happening. So if not Luella, who is it?"

The levity in the room vanished. There was really only one answer to that particular question.

"There's only one other person who answers to that title, isn't there?" Luella's voice was rarely loud, but now it was hushed even for her. "Voldemort."

All of them winced. "Don't say it, Lu. Just don't." whispered Rianne.

"It can't be him. Not again." sighed Deanna as she sank into a chair, a look of utter weariness on her face. "What I wouldn't give for a quiet year, just once."

"But how can it be?" Marlie was now the one deep in thought. "Didn't you see him off last year? Didn't Dumbledore say that he wouldn't be back for a long time yet? How can he possibly be mounting a comeback so soon? It doesn't make sense."

"So you'd rather believe one of your mates is doing it." Deanna was not impressed.

"I didn't say that!" snapped Marlie. "Just that last I heard, Voldie's in no state to be terrorising anybody. So how on earth has he managed to get the Chamber of Secrets open?"

Not even Deanna could find an answer to that. In the end, Rianne spoke.

"Look, it's getting pretty late. I suggest we all get some sleep, it's been a draining day for all of us. Especially you, Lu. See you all in the morning." And with that, she turned in. Luella, grateful for the opportunity to creep out of the limelight, did the same. Which just left Deanna and Marlie, sitting facing each other in the dying firelight. Deanna crept over to Marlie's bed, perching on the edge.

"Well? Spill. Something's on your mind."

Marlie reached up and removed her Snitch necklace, dangling it before her. "I can tell when someone is not being entirely truthful with me, Deanna. This little talisman of mine can pick up deceit a mile off. And while no actual lies passed Lu's lips tonight, there is something she is not telling us. Something important."

"Maybe she's afraid you'll go running to your mum again." Deanna pointed out.

"If it's sufficiently disturbing, I've got every right to. If keeping it to myself is putting Lu's sanity and the lives of others at risk, why on earth shouldn't I tell Mum? I don't know, Deanna. I want to trust her, but..." She shook her head. "I just get the feeling that there is a lot more going on here than we know. Lu is hiding something. I don't blame Pansy for suspecting her - Lu's not helping her own case. Everything she's said or done is screaming 'Guilty!' I don't know what she's hiding, but if she's not causing the attacks, then it's in her best interests to come clean with us. I want to stand up for her, but if I can't trust her, then it's going to be hard! I don't know. I just don't know."

Deanna stared at her hands. While she wanted to defend Luella to the hilt, the truth was she shared Marlie's fears. Luella was acting strangely, and Deanna had a feeling that she didn't know the half of it.

"So what do you suggest we do about it."

"I don't know. I can't think straight. I need sleep. But we need to keep an eye on her, find out what is going on. Talk to Rianne too - Lu might have said something to her. I think she knows more than she's letting on - how did Lu find out that she was immune to Glamoury, I'd like to know. Then see what happens."

Deanna nodded. "OK. OK. I'll see if I can pick Ri's brains."

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They moved into action as soon as circumstances let them. As the four of them were leaving breakfast, Marlie seized the opportunity to distract Luella.

"Lu, are you busy at all?" An outsider seeing Marlie's saccharine smile would not have believed that the previous evening had seen her accusing Luella of attacking her fellow students.

"Why?" Unfortunately for Marlie, Luella knew her all too well and was not fooled.

"It's just that I need some help with my Divination homework. I didn't understand what Trelawney was saying about the Lunar Nodes at all. Could you give me a hand, Lu? Please?"

"Can't Deanna help you? Divination's one of her best subjects." Luella had better things to do than end up being talked into doing Marlie's work for her. Particularly given last night's events. Honestly, thought Luella, does she have any sense of shame at all?

"Yes, but she doesn't really go in for the theory, does she? She's great at making predictions and telling Trelawney what she wants to hear, but she doesn't really know or care about how any of the systems actually work, does she? You do, though. You know about retrogrades, inversions, Celtic Crosses and everything. You're really good at that side of things. Go on, Lu, say you will, please."

Apparently not, Luella thought. She raised an eyebrow. "Got over your fear I might attack you in your sleep then, I take it."

"Hey now, you said it wasn't you and I believe you. I'd know if you were lying. I'm sure it's just someone messing around with things they shouldn't be. Come on Lu, say you'll help me, you know you want to, please?"

Luella sighed. What Marlie lacked in shame, she made up for in persistence. Besides, there was no denying that Marlie had turned cuteness into something of an art form. It really was impossible to say no to her sometimes. Rather like kicking a kitten. Luella gave in before Marlie moved on to hurt and disappointed. "All right, all right. Honestly, anyone'd think it was you had Glamoury. Come on, let's go back to the dorm, I'll explain it all to you."

"Yay!" Marlie dragged Lu off in the direction of the dungeons. However, as she opened the Great Hall's side door to let Luella out first, she turned to Deanna and gave her a surreptitious nod.

Deanna was not slow to notice her cue, and lost no time turning to Rianne.

"Ri, can we talk?"

"Sure." Rianne cleared away her plate and got up to leave. "Let's go back to the common room then."

Deanna shook her head. "No. Somewhere private. Somewhere we won't be overheard." Not far away, Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy were both watching them with unwarranted interest. Deanna, noticing their glares, led Rianne away. "It's about last night."

Rianne, following Deanna's angry stare and seeing Pansy and Draco guiltily returning to their breakfasts caught on immediately. "I see. OK, better be the dorm then."

"Not if Marlie and Lu are studying there. We need somewhere where no one, and I mean no one, ever goes."

"In that case, there's only one place I can think of. Come on."

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"Here?" Deanna looked around in disbelief.

"Yes, here! What's your problem?" asked Rianne. "You said somewhere no one ever goes. Well, no one ever comes here."

Deanna wrinkled her nose, distastefully taking in her surroundings. "Yeah, and there's a reason for that, Ri. It's the most depressing place in the school. There are Nick Cave songs that are more cheery and uplifting than this place. You know, when I said I wanted to go somewhere no one else ever does, I meant somewhere no one else ever goes, apart from Moaning Myrtle's toilet."

"You, Deanna Tyler, are too fussy by half. What's the matter, is the Heir of Tal-y-Rhys too good for a little slumming?"

"No." muttered Deanna. "But I'd prefer not to have Moaning Myrtle in the background wailing about how everyone hates her while I'm trying to discuss important things with you."

"Well, you're in luck. No sign of her today." Rianne entered one of the cubicles, lowered the lid and sat down. "So, Tyler. What's up?"

Deanna squeezed into the cubicle, closed the door behind her and squatted down on the floor.

"What do you think. Lu, of course. I'm worried about her."

"Aren't we all." Rianne lowered her voice. "Has she said anything to you?"

"No." Deanna felt her spirits deflate. "I was kind of hoping she'd said something to you."

"Sorry, mate. I'm as much in the dark as you. It isn't her, of course."

"Of course not. Luella would not do something like that. She's not like that."

"No, she's not. And yet Marlie thinks something's up. Even you must admit that Lu's been acting oddly."

Deanna nodded, weary and defeated. "Yeah. I fear for her Ri, I really do. Granted she was with you when the last attack happened, but she's got no alibi whatsoever for the first one. Gods damn it, why couldn't she have stayed at the feast? If she hadn't gone running off like that, she'd be totally in the clear. What on earth possessed her, Ri?"

"I don't know. Any idea what was really going on for her that night?"

"None. She just said that she was being called, that she had to go and left."

"That was it? She didn't say anything else to you afterwards."

"No. Just walked out, scratching her arm. Her arm..." Deanna looked up, things beginning to fall into place. "Her upper right arm. She was scratching it when she left the Hall. And when I went back to the dorm, she was looking at it in the mirror, but she pulled her robe down when I walked in. As if she wanted to hide something."

"Wait a second. Her upper right arm?" It was now Rianne's turn for the Knut to drop.

"Yeah. Reckon it's significant?"

"I should say so. Her upper right arm..." Rianne's mind raced back to the previous evening. She turned back to Deanna. "Tyler, last night. When the second attack happened. Her arm burned. She was in absolute agony, Deanna. I had to get her into a quiet corner and sit her down until it passed. It didn't stop for ages, then it seemed to peak and die away. I didn't know what it meant but looking back, it must have happened at the same time as the attack, it must have. No wonder she wouldn't let me look at it or take her to the hospital wing."

Deanna ran a hand through her hair, processing this new revelation. "She wouldn't let you look at it? Then she knows, Ri. She knows what's happening to her, if not why. Knows and doesn't want anyone else to find out. Dear gods, this is bad."

"There's more. There wasn't just pain. She had this feeling that something really bad was going on somewhere. She must have been able to sense what was happening. She must have felt the attack going on, even though she probably didn't know what it was at the time." Rianne stared at Deanna in horror. "What the hell is happening to her, Deanna?"

"I wish I knew." Deanna whispered. "I wish I knew! Do you think it has anything to do with... you know. I mean, you know she's no ordinary student."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised. I very much doubt it's a coincidence that the Chamber's been opened now. But until we can find out from Luella exactly what's going on, there's not a lot we can do."

"Well, she's not going to tell us, is she? Come on Ri, I'm her best friend, she tells me everything. It's got to be pretty bad if she's keeping it even from me. If she had any

intention of telling any of us, she would have done by now. Doesn't really leave us a lot of options, does it?" Deanna stared helplessly at her feet.

"In that case, we'd better get some help, hadn't we?" Rianne, ever the pragmatist, came to a decision. "Remember when Lu first told us? She said if we ever needed adult help to go to Snape, that he was on our side and would help us. Deanna, I think now is definitely the time. You'll have to go and talk to him."

Deanna just nodded. Worrying. Very worrying, thought Rianne. Deanna nearly always put up at least a show of resistance to talking to Snape. Granted, they all knew that Deanna liked Snape deep down, but actually showing it was anathema to her. Rianne shivered. She'd seen Deanna go through a lot of emotions in her time, but she'd never seen defeat before. And to tell the truth, she wasn't sure she liked it. Seeing Deanna Tyler uncertain and frightened wasn't a good sign. Deanna was meant to be the unstoppable and courageous one, afraid of nothing. Rianne fought back the urge to scream at her, to rage at her for daring to be so weak, for even thinking of cracking up when they needed her. When she needed her. Stop that, she told herself. Getting hysterical won't help matters. Snape'll help us. Won't he?

"OK. OK, I'll talk to him. You're right, he'll know what to do." Deanna began to cheer up, although Rianne couldn't help thinking that it seemed just a little forced. "Come on, let's go - what the?"

They were both distracted by a loud hissing noise from the end cubicle, and the sound of someone cursing under their breath. Both girls looked at each other.

"Moaning Myrtle?" asked Deanna.

"That was no ghost." Rianne's mouth was set in a very firm expression indeed. Deanna scrambled out of the way and to her feet as Rianne pushed the door open and strode out, wand in hand.

Deanna couldn't help noticing as she followed Rianne across the room that there was a cloud of purple smoke billowing into the air from the end cubicle, covering the ceiling like dry ice at a Top of the Pops shooting. Rianne was right - that was no ghost. In fact, it reminded her of that time one of Marlie's potions had gone hideously wrong and left both her and Rianne with an extra eye in the middle of their foreheads. Professor Snape's reaction had been more incredulity than anger, especially as they'd been working on a cold resistance potion at the time. Typical Marlie, really. Some people spent years trying to harness the powers of the third eye, and she went and got one in the space of one hour without even trying. Although Deanna had a feeling that that hadn't been quite what they meant.

She returned her attention to the cubicle which Rianne was even now blasting open and standing in front of, arms folded and a grim look in her eyes that reminded Deanna of her mother. Now this was going to be interesting.

Hermione and Ron were sitting on the floor either side of the toilet, Ron desperately trying to hold down the toilet lid, which was threatening to fly up in the air, no doubt owing to the purple smoke emanating from under it, and Hermione caught in the act

of stuffing a spellbook into her bag. Both had that small animal caught in the headlights look.

For a moment, none of them spoke. They just stared at each other, Ron with hostility, Hermione trying and failing to look innocent, Rianne at her most unamused and forbidding and Deanna with the grin of someone well aware that someone else was about to get it in the neck.

"And what exactly might you two be up to?" If Rianne's voice had been any more lethal, the two Gryffindors would have been dead on the spot. As it was, they were both beginning to squirm. Deanna noticed that Hermione's innocent gaze was beginning to waver.

"Nothing."

Got to give the girl full points for trying, Deanna thought. Unfortunately, even a Hufflepuff would have noticed that something was up in that sort of situation. She decided to put them out of their misery.

"Granger, there's purple smoke coming out of the toilet. What've you done to it?"

Now it was Ron's turn to speak.

"Merfolk."

"Merfolk?"

Ron's face began to match his hair as both Slytherins turned their most disbelieving gazes on him.

"Yeah, Merfolk. They live in the lake. They're having some kind of feast down there. Always does strange things to the bogs. Happens in Gryffindor Tower all the time. Doesn't your common room have the same problem?"

"No." What with one thing and another, Rianne was long past the stage where she was prepared to put up with any messing around. "And if that's a regular occurrence in Gryffindor Tower, I'd recommend a word with your older brothers. Weasley, this is a girls toilet. There's purple smoke pouring out of one of them. I want an explanation and I want it now or you're both coming with me to the nearest teacher's office. Which office is nearest, Deanna?"

"Lockhart's."

"Second nearest then. Well? I'm waiting."

Hermione stared helplessly at Ron, silently begging him for help. Ron, seemingly doing some very quick-thinking, duly obliged.

"If you tell anyone about this, we'll... we'll..." An idea came to him in the midst of his floundering. Maybe he could beat the Slytherins at their own game.

"If you say a word to anyone, we'll go straight to Dumbledore and tell him Luella's been causing the attacks." Now it was his turn to put them on the spot. Rianne could almost touch the smugness pouring out of him as he stared haughtily at them, the gauntlet well and truly thrown down. Damn him. Wasn't this sort of thing Malfoy's tactic?

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh no?" Ron threw back at her. "We heard your little chat, every word of it. So Martin's hiding something related to the attacks is she? Now that sounds dodgy. Especially given that we found her at the scene of the first one. I mean it. One word from either of you and I'm going straight to McGonagall or Dumbledore."

"Ron!" gasped Hermione. "You can't do that!"

"I can and I will. Well?"

"Weasley, if you say one word to anyone, I will personally break every bone in your..." Deanna snarled as she drew her wand. Rianne stopped her advancing on him.

"Tyler, wait." She turned back to the two Gryffindors. "You won't go to Dumbledore. Because if you do, we will tell Snape exactly what you two are doing in here, and he will get you expelled." She pointed her wand at Hermione's bag. "*Accio!*"

The book that Hermione had been trying to hide flew into Rianne's grasp, and fell open.

"It's not mine." said Hermione just a little too quickly.

Rianne turned to the front inside cover. "This book last borrowed from the library by a Miss H. L. Granger."

"Not me." said Hermione.

Rianne looked at the cover. "*Mosete Potente Potions*. I don't recall it being on the second year reading list, do you?" Flipping the book open, she turned to the page that Hermione had marked and examined the bookmark. It was a pastel pink My Little Pony one. Wordlessly, she held it up for all to see.

"It's not mine! Really!" protested Hermione, going a deep shade of crimson, trying to ignore Deanna's grin and Ron's sniggers.

Rianne flipped the bookmark over and read. "This bookmark belongs to Hermione Louise Granger, aged ten and three quarters." She began to read the page that Hermione had marked. "Polyjuice Potion. Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear." Sternness had changed into gloating. "Trying to change your image, are we? While I can't blame either of you for wanting to look different, surely there are easier ways of doing it? Couldn't you just have opted for a new haircut like the rest of us?"

"Shut up." muttered Ron, glaring at her.

"Ri. Leave them alone. It's rather touching, actually." Deanna's usual grin was well and truly back in place. "Watching them get up to mischief like that. Who'd've thought Hermione Granger of all people would be brewing up illegal potions? Congratulations Mione, we didn't think you had it in you."

"No we most certainly didn't." Rianne handed the book back with a grin. "I'm impressed. Which is why I'm not going straight to Snape. Instead, I've got a proposition for you. You will forget you heard us talking. In return, we will conveniently forget we came across your little enterprise. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, Rianne."

"Good. Well done Granger, I knew you'd see sense. Weasley?"

Ron didn't answer, just glowered at the three of them.

"Well? I'm waiting, Weasley."

"Ron, just agree to it!" urged Hermione.

Still no response. Ron, stubborn to the last, remained silent, not willing to give the Slytherins one inch in the way of a concession. Deanna decided to give him a little encouragement.

"I should just like to remind you, Ron, that Snape loathes you. You're already on your last warning - give him an excuse and he'll see you out of here. Not to mention whose stores you're going to need to raid to get half the things you'll need for this potion. One word from me and you'll be out on your ear, with something a lot worse than a Howler to worry about when your mum finds out. No pressure or anything." Deanna had the smile of one who knew she could not lose.

"All right, have it your way." snarled Ron. "I'll keep quiet. You'd better keep your side of things though!"

"Don't worry, Weasley." Rianne told him. "We keep our promises. I've no wish to see you expelled. Ginny'd never recover. Come on, Tyler." Turning on her heel, she strode out. Deanna gave them one last grin before following her.

Hermione and Ron waited until the outer door closed before retrieving what remained of their potion. The cauldron was overflowing with the purple liquid, emitting smoke, bubbles and an insistent hissing noise.

"That," said Hermione, "was far too close for comfort. Thank god it was only Deanna and Rianne."

"Only Deanna and Rianne? Hah!" Ron was not pleased. "We've now got two Slytherins aware of what we're doing, and you say we escaped?"

"Ron, grow up. They won't tell anyone. In fact, I think they thought it was a great joke. You should be grateful it was Slytherins. A house less easily bribed would have turned us in. I'm more concerned with the state of this potion."

Ron peered at the smoking remains of what had once been embryonic Polyjuice Potion.

"Can you fix it?"

"Probably not. We'll have to start again. Good thing we've not stolen the rare stuff yet, I wouldn't want to have to raid Snape's stores twice." She began poring over the recipe, trying to work out where she'd gone wrong. Ron extinguished the fire and tipped the potion away.

"Gods know what that'll do to the Merfolk."

"Are there really Merfolk in the lake?" Hermione asked him.

"Couldn't tell you. There's a species that live in Scottish lakes, but I don't know if ours has any. Found out what you did wrong yet?"

"Yeah. You're not meant to add the leeches under a waxing moon. Oh well. Full moon in two days, if we raid the student stores now we can have it sorted out by then. We've only just started really, it's not like we've lost much."

"Thank Hecate for that." Their most immediate worry over, Ron turned his attention back to what was really bothering him. "So, Mione. What do you think Luella's hiding then? Must be pretty suss if two of her best mates have to sneak in here to discuss it."

"I don't know and I don't care." She laid down her book, the look on her face reminding Ron of his mother. "Ron, you're not still thinking it was her, are you? It couldn't have been her, you heard Rianne say she was with her when the second attack happened. I'm sure she's not the Heir of Slytherin."

"Yeah? Then what did Tyler mean when she said 'you know she's no ordinary student'. Something's up with her. I know it is."

"Well I hope you're not going to start telling everyone that she's been causing all the attacks. Of course she's acting strangely, she's probably worried she'll be next. Malfoy's never liked her."

"He's never liked you either, and you don't seem worried." Ron pointed out.

"That's because I'm a Gryffindor." Hermione finished packing her bag. "Right, I'll go and get some more ingredients. You wait here for Harry. I'll see you in ten minutes. And stop obsessing over Luella. I'm telling you, it's not her." She left and walked swiftly away on her errand. Ron leant back against the wall, Hermione's parting words forgotten as soon as she'd said them.

"So Lu Martin's got a secret then." he whispered, lost in his thoughts. "Well, Harry and Mione might trust you. But I don't. And I'm watching you. Oh yeah. I'm watching you."

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"Now that was an interesting little encounter, wasn't it?" laughed Deanna as she walked back to the dungeons with Rianne. "Who would have thought it, Little Miss Law Abiding brewing up something like that? Who do you think she's going to use it on?"

"No idea, but my prime suspect is Malfoy. Hope it's him anyway."

"You reckon?" Deanna's grin became even wider. "Brilliant! That does it, we're definitely keeping quiet. Blimey, why didn't they just say they were playing a joke on Malfoy? I'd have given them a hand if I'd known that."

"Now, now. He's a housemate, we should show a little loyalty."

"What, like all the loyalty he's shown us?"

"Fair point. As you were then."

"Woohoo! Malfoy's going to suffer, Malfoy's going to suffer!" Deanna chanted, doing a little dance down the corridor for the sheer hell of it.

Rianne watched her, an amused and slightly relieved smile on her face. "You've cheered up then."

"Thinking about cruel things happening to Malfoy does that to me. Anyway, it'll be OK. I'll talk to Snape, he'll sort it all out, Lu'll recover and everything'll be back to normal and we can all relax and watch Malfoy get humiliated. Sorted!"

"Don't get too cocky." Rianne warned her. "I'm sure it won't be as easy as all that."

"Ri, I'm on a high here. Don't ruin what could be a beautiful experience."

"Hey, just trying to reconnect you to reality. I don't know Deanna, you're either depressed as hell or totally manic today. Calm down, woman!"

"I've had a lot on my mind lately, I'm allowed to be a little hyper."

"Well, stop being hyper and start being concerned. We're here."

The reminder of what she had to do cut Deanna's levity short. She stopped dancing.

"Do you suppose he's in?"

"Probably. I never had Snape down as having much in the way of a life. Bet you a Galleon he's marking. In fact, I bet you two Galleons it's those assignments we handed in last week on astral projection potions."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "Rather confident, aren't we? All right, you're on. See you back at the dorm. I trust you'll have my winnings ready."

"We'll have to see, won't we?" murmured Rianne. Turning away, she walked off with a rather crafty smile on her face.

Deanna meanwhile spent a few minutes gathering her courage before going in to face her House Master. Taking a deep breath, she went into the classroom and knocked on the office door.

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"Come in." she heard him call to her. Pushing the door open, she entered the room to find Professor Severus Snape going over a pile of essays. Damn. One Galleon to Rianne.

"Morning, sir." she said, trying to sound cheerful.

Severus blinked and checked his watch. "Good gods. What on earth is the matter? It's not even midday and you're up and about. Wonders will never cease. Too much to hope that you'll be using the unfamiliar experience of a Sunday morning to further your studies, I suppose."

Deanna stifled a giggle as she took a seat. "No, sir. I mean, yes sir. I mean... Oh forget it. What are you up to?"

"Marking your class's Potions assignments. And no I am not open to bribery."

"Not the ones on astral projection potions, by any chance?"

"Of course. They're the only ones I've set you recently."

"Oh." Deanna mentally swore again. Two Galleons to Rianne. Great, there went a week's pocket money. "Have you marked mine yet?"

"Yes. And nothing you can say will make me change the mark now."

"How did I do?" Deanna asked, peering at the pile of parchment in front of her.

"You got a B. It would have been an A but for the fact that your section on the uses of said potions appeared to consist entirely of things that are, how can I put this? Of questionable ethical value. On the other hand, it was better than Miss Lovegood's suggestions, over which there is no question of their ethical value."

Deanna raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know they had any."

"My point exactly." He laid down his quill. "So if not to try and increase your Potions grades, why are you here? I very much doubt that you're out of bed this early just to enquire after my health."

"It's not your health that worries me." Deanna sat back, playfulness dissolving into a miasma of gloom as she remembered why she'd come in the first place. "It's Lu's."

Severus nodded grimly. He'd been afraid of this. "What's wrong with her? Does it have anything to do with recent events in the school, by any chance?"

"What do you think."

"I'd be very surprised if she hadn't been affected one way or another; she's a potential target after all."

"You really have no idea, do you?" The mocking tones in Deanna's response surprised even her. "Lu a potential target, good gods, we hadn't even considered that. I could deal with that! What I can't deal with is the thought that the friend I've known ever since I can remember might be causing it."

She looked up. He hadn't reacted at all. In fact, he seemed almost frozen, a black clad statue hearing only whatever was going on inside his own mind.

"Sir?" Deanna didn't dare voice her real thoughts, which were screaming at him to talk to her, do something, anything. "Did you hear me?"

Shrugging off whatever paralysis had afflicted him, he seemed to come to life. "Yes. Yes, I heard you. She is not causing them. Is she?"

"I wish I knew. I wish I knew what was going on with her. Time was when I could read her every thought, every feeling. Whatever she was thinking, I'd know. Not now. I have no idea what is going on in her mind, but what I do know is that it isn't good. She says she's not causing them, I'm sure she wouldn't lie to me, and yet..." The words went unspoken, but Severus could guess the general gist of them.

"Deanna, what's happening? Tell me what's going on. I know what happened the night of the first attack, but has something else happened since?"

Deanna told him what had happened, starting with the Halloween Feast, then Malfoy telling them about the Chamber of Secrets, Luella's return, and the confrontations in the dorm. She noticed him nodding as she told him, as if none of this was a surprise to him. Of course, she thought, Luella must have told him what went on at the Feast, he wouldn't have let her go without some kind of explanation. But that didn't account for how he seemed unsurprised about the fight with Marlie...

"Sir," she asked, the hunch now forming in her mind too strong to deny, "this secret that Lu asked Marlie to keep. Did you know what it was? I mean, was it about you?"

Severus met her gaze calmly enough. "I don't believe that that's any of your business. However, I do know what it was. And no I am not telling you. Suffice it to say that it

does not concern the current situation. So. You leave Miss Martin alone, convinced that she didn't do it. Then what?"

"Well, nothing really happened after that. Not until last night."

"And what happened last night?"

"Well, the second attack, it got us all thinking. It got Marlie thinking. I mean, it looks like the Chamber of Secrets is real after all. That there really is an Heir of Slytherin out there. And there's only two people who have that title. Luella and... him. You know. Voldemort."

"I know."

Deanna watched him, not reassured by this in the slightest. He looked as concerned as she was.

"But... surely Lu and Harry saw off Voldemort last year. I mean, he couldn't be back so soon, could he?"

"All reason argues against it. And yet I refuse to believe that it could be Luella Martin. Not voluntarily anyway."

"But if something were controlling her? If she wasn't acting of her own free will?"

"That's a possibility." He was gazing into the distance, the look of concern turning ever so subtly into one of fear. "If someone with a less than honourable agenda had found a way of using the Redeemer's power for their own ends..." He sat up suddenly, his eyes fixing Deanna with an intensity that frightened her almost as much as his earlier anxiety had done. "What do you know? Tell me. Every little detail. It could be important."

"OK. Well, I spoke to Rianne and found out two things. First is Glamoury doesn't work on Rianne. I don't know how or why, but it doesn't affect her at all."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Does it not? How very interesting. It would appear that she's inherited some of her mother's powers then. She was immune to Glamoury as well. It's a trait that crops up from time to time, although Glamoury itself is so rare that testing one's immunity is near impossible. However, Branwen had it, and evidently so does her youngest daughter. Something worth knowing. Melissa will be fascinated. But back to Luella. What else?"

"Well, the important thing is that gives Lu an alibi for yesterday - she didn't leave Rianne's sight. She was with her when the attack happened. Which brings me to the next thing." She took a deep breath, gathering her thoughts. "Her arm. It burned when the first attack happened. I caught her examining it afterwards. Now Rianne tells me it burned again when the second one happened. She also says Lu had some awareness of what was going on - she knew that something bad was going on, although I'm not sure she knew exactly what. I'll tell you this though. I think it's significant. And I think Lu knows more than she's telling us."

"Her arm burned again?" Severus's brow furrowed in confusion. "But I checked her arm the first time around, and there was nothing there..." He looked sharply at Deanna. "See if you can get a good look at it for me. Let me know if there's anything unusual there. If there are any further developments, tell me at once. In the mean time, I'll have a word with Luella myself. See if she'll tell me anything."

Deanna nodded, grateful that at least something was being done now. "Thanks. Oh and sir?"

"Yes?"

"You don't really think it was her causing them do you?"

Severus shook his head. "I don't think so. Not given that she had an alibi for the second attack. On the other hand, she's clearly involved somehow. After all, she is an Heir of Slytherin, and it wouldn't surprise me one bit to learn that the opening of the Chamber of Secrets is affecting her in ways we can't even begin to understand."

"Poor thing. You know," reflected Deanna, "I'm glad I'm not in her shoes. I wouldn't want to be the Heir of Slytherin if you paid me. I'm so glad I'm just a normal witch sometimes."

"You're the heir of one of Britain's most renowned and talented magical families, you're extremely wealthy and you yourself are not short of magical power. I wouldn't say you were just another witch, would you?"

"Yeah, but there's no weird prophecies hanging over me, are there? And I've got no special powers or anything. And I didn't exactly have a privileged childhood, did I? My fath- I mean, the individual who contributed the non-Tal-y-Rhys portion of my DNA saw to that." Her eyes glinted in the firelight, a cold, hard gleam that caused Severus to shudder when he saw it. No one so young should look like that, he thought. She'd never looked more like her mother than she had in that moment. He pushed the thought of Caitlin away as quickly as it had come.

"Do you think you'll ever forgive him?" he asked, torn suddenly by a desperate desire to know, a yearning to find out if it would ever be possible to tell her and get any kind of reaction other than repulsion and hate.

"No." The firmness in her voice put an end to any doubts he might have had on that score. "The best he can hope for is that I might stop hating him. If he's really lucky, he might get upgraded to indifference."

Severus tried to keep his voice level, trying to ignore the part of his mind screaming in pain, begging Deanna not to turn away. Even her hatred would be better than indifference. Any connection was better than none. Damn it, why on earth do I always seem to get involved with women who loathe and despise me? mused Severus. First Caitlin, now her daughter. My daughter. Is it too much to ask for my own child to love me back? Not that I can exactly blame her...

"Child, don't waste your energy on hate. For your own sake, if no one else's, don't spend your entire life focusing on nothing except wishing him dead. Take it from one who's spent far too much time on hate himself that it's got a way of taking you over until there's not a lot else left. There's a lot in you that's worth saving, I'd hate to see it corrupted." Well, that was true enough. Nothing hurt him more than seeing Deanna in her angry and vengeful moments. Nothing except knowing he was the prime cause of it all.

"Oh, don't worry." Deanna was smiling, but it was an odd, twisted, malignant smile that gave him no comfort. "I'm not going to waste my entire life hating him. As if I'd let him live that long."

"Now you're disturbing me." Severus said in an attempt to restore some levity. Time to change the subject - seeing Deanna in this sort of mood struck fear into his heart for both of them. He'd clearly underestimated how much she was truly her mother's daughter, an easy thing to do when she looked more like him. "Listen, don't worry about Luella. I'll talk to her. We'll find out what's going on and work out what to do from there. It'll be all right. Don't worry."

"You're being unusually optimistic and comforting. Now you've got me worried." The vengeful look appeared to have passed and Deanna seemed back to normal. She was back to the usual display of wry amusement tempered with a knowing affection that never failed to make him smile.

"How's that?" Severus asked, relieved to be dealing with the more familiar Deanna Tyler again.

"We're all used to unsympathetic and cynical. Go on, go back to being embittered and sarcastic, it gives me an odd sense of reassurance. The sun is out, the birds are singing, Slytherin are leading the championship and Professor Snape hasn't got a good word to say about anyone. That to me is normality. Anything else is strange and discomforting. A bit like Malfoy being caring and altruistic or Pansy Parkinson not being an overly made-up tart."

Severus couldn't help chuckling to himself. "And there I was trying to reassure you. Next time, shall I just snap at you and accuse you of wasting my time?"

"If you could, sir. Otherwise I might start thinking you'd been abducted by bad poetry reciting aliens with a mission to destroy the Earth and replace it with a giant intergalactic highway, who'd proceeded to replace you with a clone whose sole purpose was to sound out the territory before betraying us all." She noticed the look of incomprehension on her teacher's face. "Never mind. It's a Muggle thing."

"Evidently. Well, if you insist on it, I will remain embittered and sarcastic. I'm sure you'll regret it, and I'm certain your fellow students will, but nevertheless, if it makes you feel better, malicious and cynical it shall be. Have you quite finished trying to prevent me from getting any work done?"

"I think so, sir."

"Excellent. The Weasley twins' essays are next. I can hardly wait to see what they've come up with. I suspect it'll make Miss Lovegood's ideas look almost legal."

Deanna couldn't help but agree. "You know, for two Gryffindors, it's quite surprising how Slytherin they are sometimes."

"There's nothing Slytherin about those two. In fact, I want them *nowhere* near my house. At all. Ever. Under any circumstances."

Deanna recalled Fred's words last year. "If they tried to put us in Slytherin, we'd leave." Then more recently, Marlie's argument with them over Ginny.

"I don't think you need worry about that, sir."

"Good. So, if you've quite finished...?"

Deanna took the hint and got up to leave. "Yeah, I'm done. Better let you get back to your work. Cheerio, sir."

"Goodbye, Miss Tyler." Severus said as she left, still smiling despite himself. However, the desire to laugh faded with the closing of the door. While he normally loved Deanna's company, this particular visit had left him with a feeling that something extremely bad was looming, and that when the storm broke, Luella Martin would be an all too vulnerable target for a lightning strike.

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Chapter Ten Never Challenge A Slytherin When Pride Is On The Line

At that particular moment, Luella Martin, if not blissfully unaware of her fate, was at least able to put it to one side for a moment. Tutoring Marlie Lovegood had that effect.

"So what *are* the Nodes anyway?"

"They're where the Moon's orbit intersects with that of the Earth. See, the Moon's orbit is tilted in relation to the Earth's. Where the plane of the Moon's orbit meets that of the Earth's, that's where the Nodes are. As you should know, given that you're very good at Astronomy."

"Oh, I know *that*. But what do they do in the chart?"

Luella had to think about that one. Truth was, she wasn't entirely sure of the point of them herself. They always seemed a bit unnecessary. The astral equivalent of one's navel, you couldn't have a chart without them and yet you could probably get all the key themes into an interpretation without referring to them once.

"Erm, they're all to do with karma. See, you've got the North Node over here, in between Earth and Sun. Then, on the other side, you've got your South Node."

Marlie was still looking very confused. "So what does that have to do with karma?"

Luella sighed. This was clearly going to be a long day. "Can't you figure it out yet?"

"No."

"Bloody hell, Marls. OK, look, the South Node's behind the Earth. Now, how might this relate to your pattern of incarnation?"

"Er..." Marlie sat up, inspiration seeming to dawn. Luella couldn't help but marvel at how it really was almost like seeing a little light go on. She began to wonder what would happen if Marlie got concussed. Would there be stars and little birds flying around her eyes perhaps? Worth experimenting with... no, that would be cruel, she reminded herself.

"Does it refer to your past lives?" Marlie hazarded a guess.

"Oh, well done!" At last! A breakthrough. Luella began to see just why Professor Snape seemed so routinely cynical. Not to mention how pleased he seemed when a favoured student of his did well. Luella's mind began to wander, all sorts of fantasies of Snape being impressed with her, admiring her and suddenly noticing how unbelievably pretty she was beginning to form. It was a struggle to bring herself back to reality. Stop that at once, Lu, she told herself. As if he'd be interested in you... Back to attempting to educate Marlie.

"Yes, Marls, the South Node refers to all the things you've brought over from your past life, both good and bad. On the one hand, it represents things that you feel comfortable with and can deal with easily, but on the other, too much time spent on them will only cause you to stagnate. And the North Node?"

"Future lives!" Once ignited, Marlie's enthusiasm was hard to stop.

"Not quite. It represents all the lessons you've got to learn this time around, all the things you've got to aim for, the things which'll challenge you."

"Right. Well that seems straightforward enough. Blimey Lu, why didn't you say so before? That's easy. So what's that got to do with the Dragon then?"

"Dragon?" It was now Luella's turn to look confused. "What dragon?"

"The one Trelawney was talking about. You know, that bit where she went all mystical and started banging on about the Node Dragon that encircled the Earth and how the Nodes were evil and cursed and things."

"I think she might have been referring to the fact that eclipses take place close to the nodal axis. People used to think it was a dragon swallowing up the sun, that's why they got the dodgy rep."

"Oh." A pause. Luella felt her body tense as she waited for the next question. "So why didn't she just say that?"

"Marls, it's Trelawney. Since when has she ever said anything clearly? Obfuscation is what she does."

"Well it's bloody irritating. I mean here we are trying to *learn*, and she has to go and make it as confusing as possible just to try and impress us." Marlie gestured dismissively. "Honestly, I don't know how Deanna does so well in that subject. I should have taken Rianne's advice and done Arithmancy instead."

"Yeah, you should." Luella muttered.

"What was that, Lu?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Oh." Marlie shrugged. No point bothering Luella. Especially not when she had something important to discuss with her. "Hey, Lu. Talking of obfuscation."

"Yes?" Luella found herself automatically on her guard again. Marlie's innocent and bemused manner had shifted to something quite the opposite.

"Tell me. You know Ri's immune to Glamoury?"

"Yes?"

"So how did you find out? I'm curious. After all, it's not something that just crops up in conversation, is it?"

Now here was a dilemma. Luella was not fooled by Marlie's smile in the slightest. Last night's confrontations were just a little bit too fresh in her mind for her to believe that Marlie was 'just curious'. She's testing me, Luella thought. She wants to make sure I wasn't trying to use my powers to bewitch Rianne into not thinking I'd left her, so I could slip off to do the next attack. Her eyes travelled to the Snitch around Marlie's throat, glimmering innocuously in the firelight. She'll know if I lie to her, thought Luella. On the other hand, she didn't really want to land Rianne in trouble, which telling the truth certainly would.

"Come on," cooed Marlie, "you can tell me. I won't tell anyone."

"Yeah?"

"I won't! Honest!" Marlie protested.

"Hmm." Luella went over her options. Lying not really a good idea. Nor was keeping quiet - she didn't want to give Marlie any more reasons to be suspicious. Telling the truth, on the other hand, would land Rianne right in it. But then, hadn't Rianne been trying to cheat anyway?

Once again, compassion and ethics went to war, but this time, ethics got the upper hand, with a little help from a desire to stay out of trouble.

"Oh, all right. You might not like it though."

"Why?" Now it was Marlie's turn to be wary. "What is it?"

"Well, you know that bet you and Rianne have got going."

"The one I'm going to win, yes."

"Funny, that's what Ri was worried about too. So she asked me to use Glamoury on her so she wouldn't have to put up with Tetris cravings any more. Only it didn't work. At all. Not in the slightest. Nothing had any effect whatsoever. Anyway, we waited until the post-match party, then tried it out on someone else - your brother, interestingly enough. And it worked. So we deduced from that that Rianne must be immune somehow. That's how."

Marlie had gone very quiet hearing all this, and her mouth was set in a very firm line indeed.

"I see." she said, when Luella had finished. "I see. Rianne Stormosi, you cheating little..."

"Slytherin?" suggested Luella.

"Among other things. I'll kill her, I swear it." Marlie was now pacing the room in fury, eyes blazing. She spun round to face Luella. "You are telling the truth, aren't you? Rianne *is* immune, isn't she? You haven't actually got rid of her cravings, have you?"

"Not as far as I know, although she seems to be having less of them lately."

"Good. Because if her alleged immunity turned out to be a plot, or some idea you'd implanted for your own nefarious reasons..."

"Marlie!" snapped Luella. "For the last time, it wasn't me." She got to her feet, staring Marlie straight in the eye. "Be very grateful Deanna isn't here. As it is, you're in luck. I'm not nearly as highly strung as she is. Now. I did not cause those attacks. Do you believe me or not?"

Silence. Marlie stared right back, not a trace of shame anywhere. Slowly, she reached up and fingered her Snitch necklace. Luella held her breath. Then, the tension dissolved as Marlie smiled. And for once, there was no manipulative intent behind it.

"Yes. Yes, I believe you." She let go of the necklace. The smile vanished. "But if you ever, ever, interfere in any bets of mine again, you'll get such a slapping, Lu Martin!"

"Consider it payback for you going to your mother. Do you have any idea how furious Snape was with me?"

Marlie had the decency to look embarrassed. "Sorry, Lu. I just... I just hated the idea of you getting all upset over it, and I thought that seeing as Mum knew them both, she'd be able to sort it out. I didn't mean to get you in trouble with Snape, honest."

"Sorry, mate." She looked away, blushing furiously, the guilt on her face an unfamiliar sight, but a gratifying one.

"Thank you." Seeing Marlie Lovegood actually feeling guilty was a sight rare enough to satisfy Luella. "So, friends again?"

"Friends." smiled Marlie, looking rather relieved. However, if Luella thought the moment was going to last, she was disappointed. Marlie flung herself down on her bed, her usual calculating look back in place. "So Rianne's cravings are easing, are they? That's not so good. And trying to cheat too. Still, it's not like I hadn't expected something of the sort, and at least it didn't work. I shall have to have words with Miss Stormosi."

Luella's ears were caught by the sound of approaching footsteps, a casual, measured tread that belonged only to one person that Luella knew of.

"Looks like you're about to get your chance. She's here."

Sure enough, the door opened and Rianne sauntered in.

"Morning, folks. How's things?"

"Morning, Rianne."

"Morning." Marlie had a gleam in her eyes which usually meant trouble. "So, Ri. How's the old withdrawal symptoms?"

"Yeah, not bad." Rianne settled down on her bed, leaning back, totally at ease with herself. She certainly didn't look like someone who, only a few days ago, had been pacing up and down the common room, sitting down, getting up again, doing a bit more pacing and when asked if she was all right, had snarled abuse at the asker in a most uncharacteristic manner.

"Are they unbearably painful and horrible?" grinned Marlie as she sat down next to her. "Have the dreams, jitters, short temper and not knowing what to do with yourself matured into hallucinations, voice hearing and stark, raving obsession yet?"

"Not yet." Rianne turned to Marlie, with a Canderel smile that rivalled even Marlie's. "In fact, I'm feeling quite calm at the moment. Quite relaxed. Don't know what I was worried about."

"Relaxed?" No mistaking the venom there. Luella settled into her chair. This was going to be fun.

"Oh yeah. The trembling's stopped, look." Rianne held out her hand for inspection. No movement. "I don't recall dreaming last night either. You know, I think I'm going to make it."

"Make it?" No trace of a smile on Marlie's face. In fact, she now looked horrified. However, she was quick enough to control herself. "But Rianne, you love Tetris. You're practically addicted to it. Have you gone off it already?"

"I wouldn't say that." purred Rianne. "But it's only a game, after all."

"Only a game?" Marlie's self-control was finally beginning to crack, and the pseudo-innocent smile on Rianne's face knew it all too well.

"Well, obviously. I mean, it's just one more of your Muggle toys, isn't it? Hardly one of life's necessities. I'm not addicted to your CD player, am I?"

"Yeah, but you were never on the CD player 24-7, were you?" Marlie pointed out.

"True. But it's amazing how quickly you get over something when it's not around, isn't it?" Rianne glanced in the direction of the door, seemingly listening for something. Sure enough, another set of footsteps was approaching. "That'll be Tyler." said Rianne, leaning back with a look of satisfaction. "Taciturn, sulking and in the foulest of foul moods." Without giving the door another glance, Rianne settled back against the pillows and held out her hand expectantly, ignoring the bemused looks that Marlie and Luella were giving her.

Sure enough, the door burst open and Deanna entered, distinctly fed up. Her expression did not change on seeing Rianne's outstretched hand. Instead, she simply stormed over to her trunk, reached in for her moneybag, fumbled around inside it and came up with two golden Galleons. The coins were dropped in Rianne's hand without a word and Deanna turned and flung herself down on her own bed.

"Told you." said Rianne, her calmness contrasting with Deanna's as yet unverbalised tantrum as she slipped the coins into her own moneybag.

Marlie exchanged a look with Luella, who appeared as confused as she was. "So, er, would one of you like to explain for the benefit of those of us not part of the exclusive Tyler-Stormosi universe just what the hell was going on there?" Marlie asked, not stinting on the sarcasm.

"Just settling a debt." Rianne replied. "Weren't we, Tyler?"

Deanna didn't reply. She just glared at Rianne and muttered something about Slytherins who were too lucky by half. Rianne grinned and ignored her.

"Deanna and I had a little wager going." she explained.

"Oh. Right." Luella looked at Deanna, who still didn't seem quite able to believe she'd just lost two Galleons. "What about?"

Deanna finally deigned to speak. "She bet me that Snape would not only be in, but that he'd be marking. And that he'd be marking our astral projection essays."

"I take it he was, then." said Luella, beginning to smile.

"Did he tell you how we'd done?" asked Marlie. "Did he mention mine?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

"You're doomed."

"Oh." Marlie said, deflated. "Is he, you know, open to a little persuasion to change the mark at all?"

"No." yawned Deanna. "That was the first thing he said to me. Honestly, it's as if I only ever go and see him when I want something."

"You do, don't you?" Luella pointed out.

"No. Not always. Not all the time, anyway." Deanna squirmed under Luella's knowing gaze which, with or without Glamoury, had a way of encouraging truthfulness in the recipient. Preferring not to have to end up confessing every wrong thing she'd ever done, Deanna decided to change the subject.

"So, Rianne. How did you know he'd be marking those essays anyway?"

"Easy, really." smiled Rianne. "We're meant to be getting them given back to us tomorrow. Working on the premise that he won't want to mark Fred and George's essays any earlier than he has to, he'll have left them until the last minute. I.e., today."

"That's amazing." Marlie turned to Luella, impressed. "You never told me she had Second Sight too."

"It wasn't the Sight." Rianne told her. "Just a little elementary logic. Don't believe there's any such thing as the Sight, myself. All the Divination systems seem to work more on psychological manipulation than any actual psychic talent, and how often do you get people making genuine prophecies about the future?"

"There's the Redemption Prophecy." threw in Deanna. "Not to mention loads of other ancient prophecies."

"Exactly. They're all ancient prophecies. You never get any modern ones, do you? It's always an ancient prophecy attributed to some notable ancestor that's been passed down through the family line for centuries, never one that your Auntie Nell came up with at the last family reunion. You know, I wouldn't be at all surprised if they were all the product of a young Muggle with an overactive imagination and way too much time on her hands."

"Fortunately for my bank balance, it'll never be proved one way or the other. Now, talking of Divination, I've got those chart interpretations that Trelawney wanted to get on with." And with that, as Deanna pulled out her books, charts and various bits of paper, the conversation came to an end.

As Rianne had so observantly noted, the following day was indeed what the Slyths had come to refer to affectionately as "Potions Day", a day noted for being an opportunity to get lots of points for very little in the way of effort, lord it over the other houses and generally get their egos stroked. Small wonder that most Slytherins named it as one of their favourite subjects.

Most of them wouldn't have been at all surprised, albeit highly gratified, to know that Professor Snape privately referred to those days when he had to teach Slytherins as "Slytherin Days". These, to him, were a chance to interact with his favourite students, enjoy the sensation of having students around who actually appreciated both him and his subject, and generally exploit the presence of a favourable audience by showing off for their benefit while taking certain other less respectful students down a peg or two in the process. And the Slytherin Days on which he taught Deanna Tyler's year were the ones he looked forward to most, the Weasley twins' presence notwithstanding.

Not today. Deanna's news the previous day had left him far too disturbed to enjoy the feeling of teaching his favourite Slytherins. Normally, he looked forward to seeing Luella Martin. Normally. Not, however, when she walked into his classroom as she had done today, head dropped, shoulders hunched, glancing around like a small, hunted animal, trailing behind her friends instead of joining in the conversation. While she didn't look depressed exactly, there was a nervous energy about her, a certain jumpiness that made it look as if she were about to take flight at any minute. Fearful. That just about summed her up. While a lot of Muggle-borns were looking worried right now, none of them looked quite like Luella did. Theirs was the anxiety of uncertainty. Luella's feelings bore a far closer resemblance to the fear born of knowledge. Knowledge of what exactly, he didn't know. But he owed it to both Deanna and Luella to find out.

The lesson passed surprisingly quietly. Severus was too concerned about Luella to bother picking on the Gryffindors. So uncharacteristically non-vindictive was he that Angelina Johnson leaned across the aisle to give George Weasley a nudge.

"What's up?" murmured George. Distracted as Snape seemed to be today, he didn't want to push his luck.

"Is he all right?" Angelina whispered, indicating Snape with a nod of the head. "He's not been really nasty to us once yet. And we've only lost two points so far, and that was because Fred made that rude remark about Glorious Stinkhorns."

"I know, it's disturbing." George agreed. "We're usually at least ten points down by now. The Slyths aren't doing too well either - Rianne's answered all his questions right and not a single point for her trouble. She doesn't look happy, does she?"

Angelina glanced at the Slytherin. While it would have been too much to say she was angry at Snape, she definitely wasn't giving him her usual attention, and she was slicing up her newts' tails with rather more vehemence than was strictly necessary. Marlie, normally oblivious to all but the most direct aggression, was backing away

from her nervously, a move which, Angelina noticed with more than a twinge of irritation, had the side-effect of bringing her that bit nearer to Fred. What does he see in her? she thought to herself. Honestly, men, show them a pretty face and a bit of blonde hair and they're gone. While she'd never had Fred down as the deep and meaningful type, she'd thought he'd had a little more discrimination than that.

George guessed what was on her mind. After all, it wasn't the first time he'd seen her glare at Marlie Lovegood like that. "Ange, leave it. They're not even talking at the moment. Fred said something he shouldn't have about Slytherins."

"He's got some sense, then." muttered Angelina darkly, returning to her work.

The lesson came to an end, and Severus dismissed them. He waited patiently for everyone to file out, then seized his chance as Luella, last in line, passed his desk.

"Miss Martin. A word."

The young Slytherin nearly jumped out of her skin with fright. Severus nodded grimly as his suspicions were confirmed. Guilty.

"What is it, sir?" she asked, her voice trembling. Yes, definitely guilty. Guilty and afraid. Still at least there was one good thing about it. If she'd been deliberately planning the attacks, she'd have been rather more adept at dealing with suspicion. Luella's reaction was more that of someone involved in something she didn't even begin to understand.

"Step into my office for a moment. We need to talk."

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Luella followed him in. Such a contrast to last time. Last time she'd been too concerned about him to worry about anything else. Now she felt like she'd been condemned.

He knows. He can't know. How can he know? But he does. Such were the thoughts running around Luella's mind as she took a seat. She took the opportunity to touch her arm again while his back was turned. Her nerves eased at once. You are an Heir of Slytherin, she could hear this voice telling her. What have you to be afraid of?

She let her fingers fall back into her lap as he turned and took a seat opposite her. The nervousness began to creep back. Heir of Slytherin she might be, but she was still only a fourteen year old girl faced with a teacher who clearly suspected all was not well and who was incredibly good at unearthing secrets.

He was studying her carefully, those cold black eyes showing no emotion other than a calm curiosity. For some reason, this frightened her more than if he'd been angry.

"Sir?" she asked. Might as well let him start things off - she certainly didn't intend to give away anything more than she had to.

"I just wanted to know how you've been feeling lately." he answered.

Luella could have burst out laughing. Now that was a question he was certainly better off not knowing the answer to. Best to feign ignorance.

"Oh." A pause. "Why?"

"Because you've not been yourself just recently, have you? Quite a few people have been commenting on it, you know. The general consensus is that you look terrified."

"Terrified? Me? No, I'm fine." Luella tried to smile, silently urging her Glamoury powers to kick in and make her look calm. Unfortunately for her, Glamoury didn't really work that well when the practitioner was under stress, as Caitlin had told her many times before now. Which explained why her Potions master was looking extremely dubious.

"You don't look fine. In fact, you look worried. Very worried. One might almost say anxious. For which I don't altogether blame you." The expression in his eyes had shifted to one of concern. "After all, Muggle-borns are the targets here. Understandable that you might be concerned for your own safety."

Luella clutched at this straw of hope. "Well, it is a bit worrying. I mean, even though I'm Slytherin, no one knows who the next target could be. Deanna's not letting me wander around on my own anymore."

Smart move, thought Severus. Not only does it lessen the risk of attack, it also gives Luella a steady supply of alibis. Deanna, you truly are a marvel. However, his other suspicions were not entirely allayed.

"A wise decision. Now is not a good time for the Slytherin Redeemer to go wandering around alone and unprotected. You do of course realise that you yourself are an Heir of Slytherin."

He watched Luella freeze, her already pale face going ever paler.

"It's not me." she said, just a little too quickly. "I'm not behind the attacks. I don't know what's causing them and I certainly don't know how to Petrify people."

"I didn't say it was you. I'm sure it's not. However, you're tied into the Chamber of Secrets legend whether you like it or not. And if the Chamber really is being opened, then we may need your help to sort things out. Which is why if anything strange or unusual, stranger and more unusual than normal anyway, is happening to you as a result of all this, then I need to know. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded, too terrified to speak.

"Good. All right, you can go. But remember, if anything unusual happens, anything at all..."

"I'll let you know." said Luella.

"Thank you. Good day. Close the door on your way out."

Luella left without another word. Close. So close. He was on to her now, no mistaking it. She just hoped that there wouldn't be another attack. Bad enough having to wear long sleeves the whole time and make sure no one caught her in the bath. Even worse if Professor Snape found out that a Dark Mark had appeared on her arm.

She'd never seen one, of course. All she knew about it was that there was a snake in it somewhere and that the Death Eaters had worn it on their arms. She'd seen it referred to way back in her first year, going through old Daily Prophets with Marlie. No pictures - evidently printing a picture of the Dark Mark was like saying the name in full - something not done by most good mages. It was a symbol of purest evil. And now she was wearing one.

Luella blinked back her tears as she hurried back to the common room. There was no way she could tell him, or anyone, about this. They'd turn from her immediately. Just picturing the look of disgust and hatred on Snape's face if he ever saw it made her feel ill. No, she could never tell him.

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Severus waited until Luella had gone before turning to a large cupboard in the corner of the room and magically unlocking it. The door fell open and Melissa Lovegood, dressed in navy blue robes and Armani glasses, her short blonde hair tucked impatiently behind her ears, staggered out, blinking in the firelight. Severus watched as she leaned against his desk for support, struggling to regain her bearings. Strange to think she was related to Marlene Lovegood and Narcissa Malfoy. They were both long-haired, glamourously turned out prima donnas, while Melissa, always the quiet, studious one, was the complete opposite. Not that that was a bad thing, Severus told himself.

"So, what do you think of that, Mel? Is our Redeemer hiding something?"

"She's a teenage Slytherin, Severus, of course she is. They're all up to something or other that they'd rather we didn't know about." Melissa, having regained her sense of balance, was now sitting down looking rather exasperated. "For example, my daughter is in the habit of inviting her cousin over to our house during the holidays while I'm at work. She still thinks I don't know. As far as I can gather, they spend most of their time listening to CDs, watching videos, and occasionally going into Exeter to buy lots of Muggle clothes, see the latest films and generally introduce Draco Malfoy to Muggle culture. I would say something to her, but he's not really a bad kid, he is family after all, it'll probably do him good to be converted over to the joys of Muggle life, and to be honest, I feel rather sorry for the boy."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Sorry for him? Mel, I thought you hated the family."

"Exactly. He can't have had an easy childhood. I think it'll do him good to have somewhere to go where he can just be himself for once. Leonard likes him. Reckons he's a very polite, charming boy."

"Draco Malfoy? Polite? And charming? To a Muggle?" Severus could hardly believe his ears.

"I know!" laughed Melissa. "I didn't believe it myself at first, but apparently he was fascinated by some of Leonard's work projects. Leonard ended up explaining how hydroelectric dams worked and Draco loved it."

"Maybe he was faking it." suggested Severus.

Melissa shook her head. "Leonard says he was genuine. Reckons he can tell when someone's just pretending to be interested. His exact words were 'I've had plenty of practice with you, Mel.' Uncalled for, if you ask me..."

"Somehow I don't think so. But never mind Mr. Malfoy. Back to Luella. What do you think's going on there?"

Melissa shook her head. "I have no idea. She's definitely hiding something. And yet I don't think she's causing the attacks. I don't think she's knows what's going on herself. But she knows something's happening to her. Poor child, she did look terrified. I think she's caught up in something completely out of her control and doesn't know what to do."

"She's not the only one." said Severus, patience beginning to run out. "Mel, I had in fact worked that out for myself. I was kind of hoping you could shed some light on things."

"You're the one on the scene, Severus! You're meant to be watching her, day in, day out. Have you no leads whatsoever? Haven't her friends noticed anything unusual?"

"Nothing. The only lead I've got is that Deanna and Rianne both noticed something up with her arm, but I checked it myself and there was nothing there."

"Her arm?" Melissa sat bolt upright. "Severus, she touched her arm as she came in, while your back was turned. Deliberately, and there was a noticeable gain in confidence afterwards. Not a large amount by any means, but it was there!"

"Then it is important. But Mel, she doesn't have a Dark Mark, that I do know!"

"You checked her left arm." Melissa's voice sounded neutral, but the look on her face was anything but. "But did you think to look at her right?"

"Her right arm?" The Knut dropped. "Oh for gods' sake. Why on earth didn't I think of that?" Severus slapped his forehead in disbelief at his own shortsightedness. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"How indeed. And you've lost your chance to have a look now, haven't you?" Melissa was not impressed. "To save any more elementary errors losing us time, I'll tell you it was her upper right arm. Now, keep watching her. And if another attack happens, don't lose any time. Get her into your office immediately and don't let her leave until you've had a full explanation and a look at that arm."

"Yes, Mel." Had any of his students heard him talking to anyone that meekly, he'd never have been able to control a class again.

"Good. Now, I'd say we were done here, wouldn't you? I'm off back to the DDAE - you know where to find me." She headed for the fire, reaching for her Floo powder. However, something made her turn back to him.

"Severus, I know it's kind of early, but what are you doing for Christmas? Are you going to spend it all alone with a big bottle of brandy, or are you going to break with tradition and actually let your hair down at my place for a change? No Weasleys, I promise. They're off to Egypt, the ones that aren't staying here."

"Ah, now, Mel, you know I'm not one for parties." protested Severus. "It's all so undignified. No, you youngsters have fun without me."

"You old misery, you. Anyway, who are you calling a youngster?" Melissa pretended to look offended. "I'm a full two months older than you and don't you forget it. Come on, Severus, you're one of my oldest friends if not the oldest. I've known you ever since we were kids. Is it too much to ask for you to come and enjoy my hospitality once a year?"

Severus ignored the pouting, instead cutting straight to the point. "Is Caitlin going?"

Melissa's levity disappeared. "She always goes, Severus."

"Then I'm staying right here."

Melissa sighed, hands on her hips. Much as she liked Severus, his infuriating obstinacy never ceased to drive her up the wall.

"Severus, how long are you going to keep this up?"

"Keep what up?"

"This refusal to have Caitlin Tyler anywhere near you."

Severus turned to face her, gleaming with what could have been coldness or pain.

"Until seeing her stops making me want to kill myself."

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Luella's instinctive action on reaching the Serpents' Nest was to head straight back to the dorm and stay there. However, she didn't get the chance.

Rianne pulled her aside as soon as she entered the room.

"Well? What did Snape want? And did it have anything to do with why he was in such a weird mood? I'm not happy with the points tally. Not happy at all. I'll never make my sweepstake total now." For some time now, Deanna and Marlie had been

running a Potions Points Sweepstake, based on how many points Snape gave out to Slytherin or took from Gryffindor during Potions each week. It had proved both popular and lucrative, and now virtually the entire house placed a few Sickles on it, some more often than others. Rianne didn't participate that often, but when she did, she frequently won. Which probably went a long way towards explaining her current mood.

"Don't know. It was weird. Just wanted to know how everything had been affecting me lately and if I was OK. And if anything out of the ordinary happened, I was to tell him." Lying to Snape was one thing, lying to Rianne was quite another. Besides, she already knew far too much. No point, really.

"And what did you tell him?"

"Just said I was fine, that I had been a bit worried I might be next, but that Deanna was looking out for me."

"You didn't tell him about your arm then."

Luella squirmed on the spot. "Er..."

"You didn't, did you." Rianne threw her hands in the air in exasperation. "Honestly, Lu, why the hell are you being so secretive about this? I mean, apart from being a teenage Slytherin of course. Lu, it's clearly bound up with the attacks, you're obviously in way over your head, go and tell him! Stop being such a prat about this. What could be so bad you can't talk to anyone about it?"

Luella shook her head. "You don't want to know. Trust me. You really don't want to know."

Rianne sighed. Well, she'd tried. She couldn't force Luella to talk after all. Maybe it would all sort itself out anyway. She hoped so anyway.

They were distracted by Deanna calling them over to a nearby table. It was one of Marlie's finds, a sheet of glass on top of a solid brass dolphin statue, currently covered with a black velvet tablecloth and copious Unbreakable Charms. Luella remembered Marlie buying it. They'd found it in a little alternative furniture shop in Richmond called Pure Life, along with enough fibre-optic lights, fake tigerskin throws, posters and plasma globes to keep Britain's entire student population going for the next five years. She'd had to step in when Marlie tried to pay for it, as the table cost two hundred quid and the shopkeeper was understandably suspicious of a fourteen year old who had that much cash on them. He'd been even more suspicious when Marlie tried to explain that she'd earned it from a totally legitimate electrical goods business venture. In the end, Luella had stepped in and smoothed things over. It was far too cool a piece of furniture to miss out on.

Marlie herself was currently seated at this table, teaching Ginny, Lydia and Autumn the rudiments of Jenga. The game was at an advanced stage by now, and the whole edifice looked as if it was about to collapse.

Luella and Rianne sat down next to Deanna, who was watching the game intently.

"Well? How's it going?" Rianne asked.

"It's getting very tense at the moment." Deanna told her. "There's only about three blocks left that you can get at easily now, and Lydia's going for one of them now." She held her breath as Lydia slowly teased one of the blocks out and placed it ever so delicately on top. Everyone let their breath out as the tower held.

"So, who do you think's going to lose then?" asked Deanna. "My money's on Marls."

"Bet you a Galleon it's Ginny." said Rianne, wasting no time.

"You're on." Deanna grinned.

"You're gambling an awful lot lately, Ri." commented Luella.

Rianne shrugged. "Got to make a living somehow, haven't I? My father's salary doesn't really go that far, even now he's head of the department. I don't have a huge inheritance, affluent parents or a thriving trade in converted Muggle goods to support me, do I?"

"Yeah, but surely there are safer means of getting some extra cash?"

"Safer, yes. But a lot less interesting." Rianne looked up as the tower came crashing down, leaving a blushing Ginny holding a block in her hand. "A Galleon please, Tyler."

Deanna paid up, muttering. Marlie, noticing that Luella and Rianne had arrived, told the three first years that they could carry on without her if they liked and turned to greet her friends.

"Well, hello there you guys! Couldn't resist the allure of the falling blocks, eh? Oops, sorry Ri. I know it's still a sore point."

Rianne was unmoved. "Nice try, Marls. I keep telling you, I'm over it. No amount of blocks references will make me start craving the game now. Nor will humming the theme tune over and over again, so you might as well stop that too before Deanna throttles you."

"Yes, if you could cut that out, Marls. It's driving me nuts, never mind Ri."

"Bloody hell, Ri." said Marlie, dejected. "You're meant to be an addict. What's wrong with you? The hallucinations should have well and truly set in by now, and the paranoid delusions should just be starting up."

Rianne got up. "To put it bluntly, Marls, I got a life. I recommend you do too. Better make the most of the last bits of spare time you'll have before you have to do my DADA homework for me. Come on, Lu." She headed for the dorm, Luella in tow. Marlie turned to Deanna.

"This is bad. Very bad. What the hell am I going to do? She's not bothered at all! I don't want to have to do her homework for her! What the hell do I do?"

Deanna recalled Sunday morning's conversation. Producing a quill, she whistled Nestra over.

"Hold on, Marls. I've got an idea..."

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"Now, are you sure this is going to work?" Marlie asked Deanna. A few days had passed and Nestra had by now returned.

"Almost certain of it, Marls." Deanna reassured her, passing the small parcel that Nestra had brought to her. Marlie ripped it open. There, wrapped in a note from her father wryly commenting that his life wouldn't be nearly so interesting without his daughter's crazy schemes to keep him occupied, was the small grey object that Deanna had suggested retrieving. Marlie's Tetris cartridge.

"Yeah, baby." whispered Marlie, her eyes lighting up. "Oh, Tyler, you are a genius. She'll never be able to resist the allure now it's actually here again!"

"Of course not." Deanna smiled. "Anyone can pretend something's not important to them when it's at the other end of the country. But when they have to see it all day, every day? She'll be hooked again by the end of next week."

Marlie squealed with joy. "Fantastic! Victory, here I come! Ah, Ri, you'd better start brushing up on your flying skills!"

Deanna glanced over to the other side of the common room, where Luella and Rianne were going over their Herbology homework together. "Come, let's get to the dorm. Start setting things up."

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So it was that when Rianne returned to the dorm to pick up some more parchment and another ink bottle, she found it empty. How odd. She could have sworn she saw Marlie and Deanna head up here. No sign of either of them though. How very strange.

She collected the things she'd come in search of and turned to leave. However, as she did so, she noticed the small grey object lying on the table, its familiar blue and purple label drawing her attention irresistibly. She picked it up and examined it, curious as to how it had got here when it was meant to be far away at the Lovegood's. It did not take long for her to guess at the truth.

"Well, well, well. Could you not live without it either, Marls? Dear oh dear. You are such a little hypocrite, you know."

"Hypocrite??" Marlie muttered furiously from her hiding place under Deanna's bed. Next to her, Deanna nudged her in the ribs.

"Ssh. She'll hear us!"

Smiling to herself, Rianne replaced the cartridge. "Yes, I see your game, Marlie Lovegood. Did you think that confronted with it, I'd crack under the pressure and give in? Please." She turned round, eyes idly scanning the room. "I suppose the two of you are hiding under one of the beds. Deanna's, probably - there's no room under Marlie's bed what with all the designs, a Cleansweep Seven and all those spare parts. Not really a very original hiding place, I must say. Let's hope you two never have to take cover when a horde of Death Eaters storms your house." A smug shake of the head and a rather superior laugh. "Never mind, eh. Better luck next time, you two. Be seeing you." She sauntered out, the cartridge lying on the table where she'd left it. Marlie and Deanna lost no time in extricating themselves.

"You said it would work!" Marlie yelled at her friend.

"I thought it would! I didn't know she'd be able to resist temptation did I?" Deanna shouted back.

"This can't be happening, it can't be!" moaned Marlie. "I can't possibly lose! I've never lost anything in my life, I can't start now!"

"Haven't you?"

Marlie shook her head. "No, not really. Even last year, I didn't lose exactly. I threw the crucial match away rescuing Harry, but that's not the same as losing. Oh gods, I'm going to be so humiliated!" She sunk onto her bed, head in her hands, bewailing her misfortune.

Try as she might, Deanna found it hard to gather much sympathy for her.

"Well, you will insist on starting these things, won't you? Honestly, you know what Rianne's like, she could match Snape in the self-control stakes. It's your own silly fault for challenging her in the first place."

"Thanks a lot, Tyler." snapped Marlie. She dried her eyes and picked up the cartridge. "Well, I shall just have to take more of an active role, shan't I? I will win this bet, if I have to put the thing on a fishing rod and dangle it in front of her everywhere she goes!"

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And that, more or less, was what Marlie did. Everywhere Rianne went, she found the Tetris cartridge before her eyes. Marlie would leave it lying in front of her during lessons, pester her with it during meals, play the game incessantly in the common room, stand behind her in corridors whispering "Tetris! Tetris! Tetris!" and cause it to levitate back and forwards between Rianne and her textbooks while she was trying to work.

To no avail. Luella's problems had caused Rianne to forget about Tetris entirely, and once having discovered that she could live without it, her natural Slytherin willpower

ensured that she could continue to do so, even in the face of all the temptation Marlie could throw at her.

Finally, November came to an end, and so did the bet. 1st December dawned, and Rianne was still very much Tetris-resistant, much to Marlie's chagrin.

"Well, Marlie, time's up!" grinned Rianne as she sauntered into breakfast. "It's December, and I think we all know what that means. The bet's over, it looks like I've survived with my sanity intact, and I'm here to claim my winnings."

Marlie was still in a state of shock. "I lost. I lost. I can't believe I lost. NOOOOO!!!!" she howled.

Rianne patted her on the back, grin not fading for a minute. "That's right. You lost. I won. Get over it. And looking back on the terms of our agreement, calling Deanna and Lu as witnesses, I do believe that means I need never write another Gilderoy Lockhart DADA assignment again."

Marlie's spirits plummeted even lower. "Lovely. Just what I need. As if I don't have enough trouble getting my own work in."

"You always get Lockhart's in on time though, don't you, Marls?" Deanna grinned. "See it as another opportunity to sing his praises."

"Hey now, don't try and make her feel better about it!" snapped Rianne. "She's meant to be suffering."

"Hear that, Marlie?" Deanna said, nudging her in the side. "You get to suffer too. Look! Lots of posing, drama queening and generally milking it thrown in for nothing. You'll love it."

"Will I." Marlie looked far from convinced by this.

"Yeah, it'll be a laugh. Look, I'll give you a hand with some of them. See it as a golden opportunity for taking the mick. It'll be fun, seeing how far we can push things without him realising."

Marlie appeared even more depressed at this. "And if he notices? He'll hate me. He'll never ask me to help him answer his fan mail again."

Luella and Rianne both immediately began staring at their fingernails and biting their lips, anything to stop themselves bursting out laughing. While Deanna, eyes wide, drew in a deep breath and tried to stop her respect for Marlie taking a running jump out of the nearest window.

"You answer Lockhart's fan mail?"

"Oh yeah." nodded Marlie. "I'm often round there, giving him a hand addressing it all. He's always giving me advice on handling fame and telling me stories about his career.

We have a great time." Her eyes misted over as a dreamy blissed-out smile crossed her face.

Deanna fought back the urge to vomit. "Alright, alright, whatever. Marlie, you seem to have overlooked one salient fact in all this. It'll be Rianne's name appearing on the essays, not yours. Lockhart won't know it's you, and your little trysts will remain unaffected. You'll still be his favourite little groupie, although gods only know why you'd want to be."

The lights went back on inside Marlie's mind. "Yay! Brilliant! Cool! Thank you, Deanna!" Her face fell again. "Of course, I've still got to write the bloody things."

"I'm sure you'll cope. Hey, here's something that'll cheer you all up." It was now Deanna's turn to light up. Luella wondered what on earth she had to tell them. There weren't many subjects that Deanna allowed herself to get this enthusiastic about.

"I had a look on the common room noticeboard this morning and guess what's starting up next week?"

"Some extracurricular DADA tuition taught by someone who actually knows what they're talking about?" suggested Rianne.

"Nope. Better than that."

Rianne sat up, now really intrigued. "We're going to be allowed to take it in turns to give Lockhart a kick in his vulnerable bits?"

"Sadly not, but this is as good. There's a Duelling Club starting up!"

All three of them started taking an interest.

"A Duelling Club? Really?"

"When?"

"Who's teaching it?"

"One at a time! Next Tuesday, I think. In here at seven. Don't know who's teaching it though."

"Maybe it's McGonagall." suggested Rianne.

"Or Flitwick - I think he was a duelling champion once." mused Marlie.

"Do you think it'll be Snape?" asked Luella hopefully.

"I don't care as long as it's not Lockhart." said Deanna. "But just think, a proper duelling club! Won't that be cool!"

"Not that cool." Rianne pointed out. "This'll be proper duelling, with rules and things. Not the kind of dirty fighting you're into."

"Rianne, how many of our fellow Slytherins do you think will be attending this club?" asked Deanna patiently.

Rianne glanced up and down the table. Not far away, Lydia could be heard enthusing to Ginny and Autumn about how much fun duelling was and how her father had been a duelling champion once, while on the other side of them, Draco was bragging to Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy about how he was sure to be the best there and how his father had taught him to duel before he could walk.

Rianne turned back to her friends. "Most of them, I'd say."

"Exactly. Anyone who thinks it's going to be played by the proper Viscount Fox-Salisbury Rules has got a nasty shock coming to them. My mum reckons that if she ever catches any of her Auror trainees using the official duelling rules, she fails them automatically. Quickest way to lose a fight, she reckons." Deanna's usual self-assured pride was firmly in place once more, the way it always was when she spoke about her mother. Luella couldn't help smiling. Caitlin Tyler never could do anything wrong in her daughter's eyes. Rather like the way Draco always spoke about his father, although Deanna would have hit the roof if anyone had dared to compare them out loud.

"Blimey, Tyler, I wouldn't want to have to partner you." remarked Marlie. "I don't want to have to spend three months in the hospital wing again. But on the other hand, if it gets me out of doing Ri's work for her..."

"Hey, you stop trying to wriggle out of it!" Rianne demanded. "We had a deal, remember?"

Marlie immediately began whining again, and a full-scale argument began to ensue. However, when the dust had settled, all of them had decided that this Duelling Club would definitely be worth investigating.

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The week passed quickly, and Tuesday evening found the four of them heading for the Great Hall, all looking forward to learning how to duel. However, their enjoyment was marred by the presence of half the Slytherin second year behind them. Draco, with his usual modesty, was once again heard proclaiming his duelling prowess to anyone who'd listen.

"Of course, my father taught me to duel years and years ago. Don't really see the point of going myself,"

"Well go back to the Nest then." Deanna muttered.

"but it'll be fun to see everyone else get humiliated." continued Draco. "Not to mention showing everyone how duelling should be done."

Marlie tugged at Deanna's sleeve. "DT, is there any way you'd consider taking him on as a duelling partner? You could take him in a fight, I know you could."

"Nah, I think Malfoy senior might get a bit annoyed if I put his son in hospital." Deanna replied.

"This is a bad thing how?"

Deanna didn't get a chance to reply. Draco, bored of bragging to his crowd of sycophants, had turned his attention to Ginny and her friends, who were right behind him.

"So, Weasley, are any of your brothers going to this little gathering? I don't suppose they'll have had proper duelling tuition before. Your family's not really high enough on the social ladder to have time for things like that."

Ginny opened her mouth in shock, not sure how to react. It was Lydia who leapt to her defence.

"At least her family have done an honest day's work in their lives, Malfoy! What contribution have your lot ever made to the world?"

Autumn plucked at her friend's sleeve. "Lydia, he's a Malfoy, they're very rich and powerful, is this really a good idea?"

"If Deanna Tyler can get away with it, then so can I!" Lydia responded. "Well, Malfoy? Going to justify your pitiful existence to the rest of the world or not?"

Draco just raised an eyebrow, more amused than threatened. "What's this I see? A Vetinari sticking up for one of the Weasleys? Your line has gone soft in recent years, hasn't it? Must be that Gryffindor half-blood mother of yours."

Lydia glared at him but succeeded in keeping her temper. "Well, if we're comparing purity of blood here, then you're hardly one to talk. Isn't your mother a half-blood too?"

That stopped Draco in his tracks. "You leave my mother out of this." he said, his words laced with a venom that would have put a manticore to shame. Drawing his wand, he advanced on the first year, who despite her brave words, began to look just a little worried.

Deanna, watching all this, drew her own wand. Her earlier intuition about Lydia had been spot on - it really was like watching her younger self in action. However, she'd never actively antagonised anyone older than herself yet. Not without back up around anyway. She turned to Marlie. "Marls, about challenging Draco. I think you may have been onto something."

Marlie, seeing Ginny watching events unfold with a look of absolute terror on her face, nodded once and drew her own wand, following Deanna into action. Rianne rolled her eyes and turned to Luella.

"Look at them. We haven't even reached the Great Hall yet and there's a fight brewing already. Better get your wand out, Lu, they may need reinforcements."

Luella doubted this very much, but drew her wand anyway. Someone had already got the first blow in.

"*Expelliarmus!*" Malfoy's wand was gone in a flash. He didn't even bother turning round.

"That you, Tyler? Should have known you'd be stepping in. Get a different tactic for once, will you?" he drawled, snapping his fingers for Crabbe and Goyle to join in.

"Already have." said Deanna smugly. "Wasn't me who Disarmed you."

Malfoy turned around. Two things caught his attention. One was Marlie idly twirling his wand around. The other was Crabbe and Goyle caught in a magical net and struggling to get out, not very successfully.

"Entrapment Charms. Very useful little things, you know." said Deanna as she prowled round the cursing bodies of Crabbe and Goyle. "Language, boys." she said mildly. "Yes, Entrapment Charms. Standard piece of Auror magic. Learnt it from my mother over the summer. Stop struggling, Goyle, it won't do you any good. See, Malfoy, you're not the only one whose parents have been training them up in advance." She gave a poisonous little smile that rivalled Marlie's best efforts any day before turning to the first years. "You lot OK?"

Autumn and Ginny nodded, both looking terrified. Lydia, on the other hand, had recovered her bravado virtually immediately.

"Yeah, we're fine. Of course, I could have handled it by myself." The snobbish air briefly resurfaced. "But thank you anyway." she added, not wanting to seem ungrateful. She nudged the net with her foot. "Nice charm work. My dad never teaches me any Auror magic."

"Probably scared you'll hex all your enemies into St. Mungo's." remarked Marlie. "My mum is."

"Whereas mine couldn't give a damn and would probably be quite proud of me if I did." commented Deanna. "Now, what do I do about you boys? How to release you without getting hexed as soon as my back is turned. Hmm."

Her musings were broken by an urgent hiss from Rianne. "Tyler! Snape!"

The net was gone in an instant, and Draco found his wand thrown back to him with unseemly haste. Crabbe and Goyle struggled to their feet just as Snape rounded the corner.

"Greetings, students."

No one answered. Snape's usual languid gaze took in each one of them in turn, his teacher instincts telling him that someone had almost certainly been in breach of school rules here... but who? Who looked guilty? All of them, which didn't get him very far.

"Having some kind of party, are we? What's the occasion? Someone's birthday, is it? Yours perhaps, Miss Weasley?" He seized on the nearest Slytherin to him. Also, there was something different about her. She looked even more fearful than the rest of them.

"No. Mine." Marlie leapt in instinctively. Defending Ginny was rapidly becoming second nature to her these days. "I turned fifteen last week," (well, that much was true anyway), "and I was just asking my cousin why he didn't get me a card." She turned on her best smile. It had never worked on Snape yet, but there was no harm in trying.

"I see. Well, important as it may be to you, Miss Lovegood, there are more important concerns in the world at large, and your little entourage is blocking the corridor. Unless you all have places to be, might I suggest you adjourn to your common room? That is the intended venue for socialising after all."

"We're going to the Duelling Club, sir!" said Deanna, deciding that a change of subject was what was called for here.

Snape's lip curled into a sneer. "Are you now. How interesting. I am going that way myself - I've been asked to provide a little assistance in conducting it. I did wonder if I might see you there."

"No one beats me at duelling. No one." Deanna had turned serious. "I've got a reputation to uphold."

"Well, let us hope tonight only serves to enhance it." returned Snape, a strange little smile playing around his lips. "Now, children, if you'd like to get a move on? We wouldn't want to be late, would we now?" He ushered them all on their way. Draco, Crabbe and Goyle muttered to themselves and cast dark looks at Deanna, but with Snape watching them, there was very little they could do. Deanna appeared not to notice the looks they were giving her. However, Rianne did, and the murderous looks in their eyes struck fear into her heart. She recalled their first year, in which Deanna had been responsible for getting Crabbe and Goyle's older siblings expelled. Well, Deanna herself seemed fairly secure. She shot another glance back at the second years. Draco was saying something to Crabbe and Goyle, before all three of them turned to look at an oblivious Luella. This time, Rianne really did feel her blood run cold. Yes, Deanna was in all probability safe from harm. But she'd never feared so much for Luella...

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They entered to find the Great Hall packed. Obviously learning how to duel was quite a popular option given recent events, although as Deanna kept on reminding them all, the official duelling rules were one of the quickest ways to lose a fight in existence.

Severus had seen his charges into the hall before waiting outside to catch any stragglers and meet up with the staff member who'd somehow managed to talk him into this. Actually, he reflected, that wasn't strictly true. He'd volunteered freely enough, after all.

"You're starting what?" he'd asked in derision. "A Duelling Club?"

"That's right, Severus!" Lockhart had beamed. "After all, what with all these attacks that have been going on lately, we can't be too careful, can we? Students need to know how to protect themselves."

"And you're going to teach them, are you?" Severus had said, trying to picture the results if all the students adopted Lockhart's standard techniques of defence. Then wishing he hadn't.

"Well, obviously. No one knows more about duelling than I do! I see it as a moral duty to impart my knowledge to the younger generation. I'd be letting them all down rather badly if I failed to teach them how to defend themselves and then they ended up in grave danger as a result, wouldn't I now?"

Severus privately thought that the risks of a student coming to any great harm could only be increased by a duelling session with Lockhart, but decided not to say anything out loud.

"Do you really think the students will be interested in a Duelling Club, Gilderoy?" After all, to paraphrase the man himself, he'd be failing in his moral duty to just about everyone if he didn't at least try and talk Lockhart out of it.

"Oh yes. I think there's quite a bit of demand for it. That young Miss Tyler, for example, I gather she's quite the dueller wannabe. I'm sure she could benefit from some extended tuition in the subject."

Severus's detached air of amusement evaporated instantly. For some reason, the thought of Lockhart anywhere near Deanna did that to him.

"You're thinking of teaching Deanna Tyler how to duel?" He could hardly believe that anyone, even Lockhart, could possibly think that Deanna needed any encouragement to start and win fights. He couldn't even begin to remember how often she'd got in trouble for fighting in the corridor. Far too often, that much he did know.

"Oh yes. She's got a lot of potential, if she can just get her confidence up. That's her trouble, no self-belief at all."

Severus idly wondered if Lockhart had actually met Deanna Tyler at all. He wouldn't put it past her to have produced some kind of clone to attend Lockhart's classes for her. He made a mental note to ask her, find out her secret. After all, having a clone to attend staff meetings on his behalf sounded like quite a useful thing to have.

"Sounds like quite a challenge. Are you sure you'll be alright on your own?"

"Well, I believe so, Severus. Why?"

"Just that if Deanna is to receive the best in tuition from you, then she's going to need your full attention. And you can hardly give her that with anything up to two hundred students there as well."

Lockhart's smile began to fade. "I suppose that is true, Severus. I can't teach them all at once. I hadn't quite thought that far ahead."

Severus resisted the urge to snap back a sarcastic comment. Now, now, Severus. You have him right where you want him. Charm and diplomacy is what is needed here.

"Well, I do have one idea... but you probably won't be interested."

Lockhart seized on the bait at once. "No, no, Severus, tell me. I'd love to hear it!"

"Are you sure? I mean, you'll probably hate it." demurred Severus.

"No, no, I'm always open to suggestions. You know me, Severus."

Several suggestions as to what Lockhart could do sprang to mind - however, he restrained himself. Must not blow it now, he told himself.

"Well, alright then. I've done a little duelling myself before now, why don't I give you a hand? I could supervise the rest of them while you go one on one with Miss Tyler. What do you say, Gilderoy?" The accompanying smile would not have fooled anyone other than Lockhart. Fortunately, fooling Lockhart was not tricky if you were as skilled a manipulator as Severus (or for that matter, even if you weren't).

Lockhart clapped his hands with joy. "Severus, that's wonderful! Would you? Would you really? Oh, but I couldn't possibly ask you. I couldn't possibly make that kind of demand on your time."

"No trouble, Gilderoy." murmured Severus. "I'm sure we can arrange a mutually convenient evening. After all, even experienced professionals like myself could stand to learn from you, Gilderoy." Severus wasn't sure whether or not he'd overdone the smarm there. However, he relaxed when he remembered he was talking to Lockhart - it wasn't possible to overdo it.

"Ah, thank you, Severus!" Lockhart beamed, slapping him on the back. "I knew I could rely on you! You and me, we make a great team, don't we?"

"We certainly do, Gilderoy." Severus had responded, trying not to burst out laughing. "We certainly do."

And now it was the night of the Duelling Club, and Severus was standing outside the Great Hall waiting for Lockhart to show up. He checked his rather battered watch, old but still just about ticking. Late. Well, wasn't that Lockhart to a tee? He glanced around, looking for him. Hurry up, Gilderoy, he thought. I don't have all night.

Fortunately, Lockhart chose that moment to put in an appearance. Severus resisted the urge to vomit. Purple robes. Bright purple robes. With a rather gaudy golden trim. He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Hideous. However, he was still Slytherin enough to pretend to be pleased to see him.

"Ah, Gilderoy. Glad you could make it. The Hall's packed, I think we'll have quite an audience."

"Excellent, excellent!" Lockhart peered through the slightly open door. "Is Miss Tyler there?"

"In the very front row. I spoke to her earlier, she's really looking forward to it. Of course, she doesn't know you're going to be giving her your full attention tonight, but I'm sure she'll be thrilled when she finds out. Ecstatic in fact." Severus tried not to grin too hard at this. Deanna's reaction would certainly be interesting, that was certain. And while they were on the subject of Deanna...

"Tell me, Gilderoy. Did you ever hear from her mother?"

Lockhart sighed, his face falling. "Alas, she turned me down. She was very apologetic, said she regretted having to hurt my feelings, but her affections were engaged elsewhere. She told me the story, it's quite heartrending actually."

"Heartrending? Tell me more." Severus could hardly wait to hear what kind of sob-story Caitlin had concocted this time.

"It seems she's in love with this wealthy Muggle. However, she's unable to marry him because he's a member of some Rome-based religious sect that forbids divorce, and he's already married. She tells me his wife went mad about seven or eight years ago and is now a patient in an exclusive clinic in Switzerland, unable to recognise even her own family now. Of course there's not much left of the marriage anymore, but on the other hand, this chap is forbidden to divorce and won't anyway as there's no one else who'll pay her medical bills. So there's poor Caitlin caught up in all this, unable to marry him, but not wanting anyone else. The poor, poor woman, it's all so sad!" Lockhart produced an enormous purple handkerchief and began to dab at his eyes.

"Too bad." murmured Severus, trying his hardest not to burst out laughing. Caitlin, he thought, you are an absolute genius! He wondered how long it had taken her to come up with that little story, and if Mel had been involved. Well, the answer to the second question was obvious. Of course she had, the whole thing had Mel Lovegood stamped all over it.

Lockhart recovered himself. "Ah well, maybe Caitlin Tyler's not my type after all. Does she still hang around with Melissa Harker, do you know?"

Once again, Severus had to fight for self-control. "Out of luck again I'm afraid, Gilderoy. She's been married for nearly twenty years. I should know, I was at the wedding. Now shall we proceed? We don't want to keep our charges waiting for too long, do we?" He indicated the doorway. Lockhart, once again beaming, thanked him profusely and went in.

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The entire hall fell silent as they walked up on stage. No surprises there - Lockhart had that effect on people. Severus guessed that most people couldn't believe that an apparently heterosexual male would wear anything like that. He glanced around at the crowd of upturned faces. Every emotion from disappointment to disgust was visible, and the most disgusted face of all was that of Deanna Tyler. Turning away from Lockhart, she caught his eye and gave him a look of sympathy. Severus gave a conspiratorial smile back. After all, it was for her sake that he was doing this. He remembered talking to her on the first full day of term, and her recounting how Lockhart had humiliated her in front of the entire class. Well now, my daughter, he thought, here is the hour of your revenge. I may not be able to be a proper father to you, but this much I can do for you.

Lockhart was giving the crowd his usual spiel. Severus, his mind falling back into its usual habit of ignoring whatever Lockhart was saying, was only pulled back to reality by the mention of his own name.

"He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about duelling himself and has sportingly agreed to help me with a little demonstration before we begin."

"Hold on, Gilderoy." Severus interrupted, seeing an ideal opportunity to put his plan into action. "Weren't you saying earlier how certain individuals could benefit from a little one to one tuition?"

Confusion spread across the hall as students turned to one another, wondering what on earth he was talking about. Severus caught Deanna's eyes again and smiled at her. She didn't look confused, but she was smiling a little herself, as if trying to guess what he was up to now.

"Was I, Severus?" Lockhart looked more than a little perplexed himself.

"Why, of course. Why else did you accept my offer of assistance?" He turned to the audience, and singled out Deanna again. She stopped smiling at once. "Miss Tyler, could you come up here please? Bring your wand."

Deanna got up, shaking, and walked slowly, very slowly, on to the stage. Marlie was staring after her with a look of something which, if he hadn't known better, he could have sworn was envy, while the rest of the Slytherins were cheering her, shouting "Go on, Tyler, show him what you're made of!" In fact, quite a few Gryffindors, Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs were cheering too, and there wasn't a student anywhere who wasn't beginning to grin. Deanna's reputation as someone who needed no lessons in these things was known to just about everyone, and it had not been played down in the telling.

Deanna walked straight over to him, her eyes a mixture of curiosity and sheer fury that she'd been dragged up in front of the entire school like this.

"Trust me, Deanna." he whispered to her. "I know what I'm doing." He turned back to Lockhart. "Well now, Gilderoy, didn't you say she could do with a little expert advice

from yours truly? I think this could be a golden opportunity. Why don't you talk her through the opening formalities and engage her in a mock battle? This way, the entire school gets to see you in action and benefit from your wisdom. What do you say, Gilderoy?"

Deanna caught on immediately. A slow smile began to creep across her face as she took her wand firmly in hand. Lockhart didn't appear to notice anything odd, as he was his usual cheerful self.

"Why, Severus, that's a wonderful idea! Now, don't worry, Miss Tyler, I won't hurt you. You can do all the attacking, I'll just demonstrate how to block."

The grin on Deanna's face grew even wider. Really, thought Severus as he stepped out of the way, this is far too easy. He's just walking right into it!

"Now, Miss Tyler, we face each other like so, yes, that's right. And then we bow, like this." He gave an elaborate bow with much twirling of his arms. Deanna merely nodded briefly. Severus couldn't help feeling proud. Already one up on Lockhart.

"Then we hold our wands, like so, bring them back over our heads in the accepted fashion, that's right, and on the count of three, we let fly with our spells. At least, you will. I will just show everyone how to block them. Now, I want you to come at me as hard as you can. Give it your best shot."

Deanna lowered her wand, a rather Caitlin-esque smile playing around her features. "Are you sure, sir? Do you really want my best shot? I mean, I wouldn't want to hurt you or anything."

Yes, go for it Deanna, that is absolutely perfect, thought Severus, barely able to contain himself. He glanced at the crowd, all of whom were clearly thinking much the same thing judging by the expectant grins on their faces.

Lockhart, not having a clue what he was letting himself in for, walked right into Deanna's trap.

"Don't you worry about that, my dear! I shall be quite alright. I want you to do your worst. In fact, I insist on it."

"Sure?" asked Deanna.

"Absolutely. Come on, let me have it!" Lockhart spread his arms dramatically.

Deanna sighed and raised her wand. "OK, sir. If you insist. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Lockhart chuckled. "Such fighting spirit. Now, we hold our wands like so, and on the count of three. One... two..."

He never got to three. Deanna generally fought according the Slytherin Code of Honour, and rule number one was never wait until the count finishes. Her first hex

sent him staggering back, completely off-balance, getting a roar of applause mixed with laughter. Severus, very wisely deciding that the best vantage point for this was away from the stage, walked down the steps and leaned against the far wall to watch the proceedings.

There was really no contest and only one possible result. However, Deanna, displaying a sense of timing and sheer sadism that could only have come from Caitlin, kept the fight going on for far longer than was justified, now hexing him, now stepping back and letting him recover before letting go with yet another blow. Occasionally, she'd even reverse the hexes she'd cast so as give him something approximating a sporting chance. Severus could only marvel at her skill, both the actual magic used and the way she played with him, prolonging the suffering for both her amusement and that of the audience that Severus had no doubt that Deanna was performing for. It had all worked out beautifully. Deanna couldn't have done better if she'd been working to a script. Severus sighed with happiness, every fibre of his being alive with a fierce paternal pride. That's my girl, he thought. That's my girl.

At length, he decided to call a halt to proceedings. He was beginning to feel rather sorry for the man. Sometimes, you just had to show mercy.

"Alright, Miss Tyler, I think that's enough for now." he said languidly, a light touch of his fingertips on her shoulder bringing her to a halt. "I think everyone's now got a pretty good idea of what to look for in a successful dueller. Are you alright there, Gilderoy?"

Lockhart was hauling himself to his feet, straightening his robes and hunting around for his hat. "Yes, yes, I'm quite alright, Severus. Thank you, Miss Tyler, that was, er, very well done, yes, very well done indeed. However, some of your moves were just a little too predictable, and you could do with a little practice on some of your hexing..." He seemed to notice the looks Deanna and Severus were giving him, because he instantly changed the subject. "Anyway, enough demonstrating! If you'd all like to get into pairs..."

Severus accompanied Deanna off the stage. She lost no time in bragging about her achievements.

"That was amazing! Were you watching, sir? Wasn't I good?" She was literally bouncing up and down with excitement, victory's sweet intoxication coursing through her veins.

"You were indeed. Caitlin could not have done better. I personally couldn't take my eyes off you. Ten points to Slytherin for one of the most entertaining evenings I've had in a long time." He stopped, turning to look straight into her eyes. "Well done, Deanna Tyler. I'm proud of you."

To his surprise, Deanna actually blushed and shuffled her feet, looking rather embarrassed. "Thank you!" she whispered shyly, before giving him another taste of that amazing smile that transfigured her face completely and running off to join the rest of the Slytherin fourth year, all of whom with the exception of Marlie Lovegood

were prostrating themselves before her chanting "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

Severus turned away with a smile. Teenagers today, they were so much more melodramatic than he ever remembered being. Still, at least one score had been settled, to just about everyone's satisfaction.

He looked up and noticed Draco Malfoy not far away. He was watching Deanna, looking rather impressed but trying to hide it. Then Goyle said something to him and his usual sneer was back. Draco turned his attention away from the still celebrating fourth years, his eyes falling on Harry Potter. The sneer changed to a look of absolute hatred. Severus recalled the first Quidditch match of the season with a grimace. Another Slytherin with a score to settle. With yet more manipulation in mind, he stalked over to Harry and Ron. Maybe it wouldn't just be Deanna who got one over an enemy tonight.

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"Stop it, you lot. You're embarrassing me." Deanna was still quivering after being told by Snape that he was proud of her, and all the adulation her classmates were giving her was proving just a little too much.

The Slytherin fourth year pulled itself to its collective feet. As soon as they'd done so, Deanna found herself having her back patted, hair ruffled and name chanted by virtually all of them.

"Way to go Tyler!" one of the boys yelled.

"That was amazing, Tyler." said Lucas, wiping a tear from his eye. "All term I've been hoping and praying, watching and waiting for someone, anyone to finally give Lockhart the kicking he's been crying out for since day one, and now it's finally happened! Tyler, that was brilliant. You are God."

"Yeah, Deanna, that was the best performance I've ever seen!" Rianne yelled in Deanna's ear. "You've just lived out my number one fantasy. Oh, I am so envious of you, you know!"

"It's true." Luella confirmed. "At one point, she was ready to storm the stage herself and give you a hand. It was all Lucas and I could do to stop her. I tell you what, she wasn't the only one either. I think you just lived out the fantasies of half the school."

"So I see." Deanna cast her eyes around the hall, watching all the students who were still looking at her. Several of them waved and shouted "Go Tyler!" at her when they saw her looking their way. Deanna acknowledged them with a short bow and a smile before turning back to her friends. "Man alive, this is going to be talked about for weeks! Fantastic! Hey, I'm on a roll now. So. Who wants to be my duelling partner then? Come on, I'll take you all on!" She began pacing around, brandishing her wand. "Come on, you big bunch of wusses, who's up for a fight?"

It was really quite strange how as soon as she'd said that, all the attention seemed to vanish. Rianne immediately grabbed Luella, loudly declaring "I'll duel with you, Lu." while the five boys also swiftly paired off. Geoff Foxworth, not to be left without a partner, grabbed hold of a nearby Hufflepuff who was looking a bit lost and dragged him off to start duelling.

Deanna's face fell and the euphoria melted. "Hey, where'd you all go? Bloody hell, you lot, you're such losers. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'll duel you, DT."

Deanna turned to see Marlie watching her. And she did not look happy. Deanna recalled that she'd been the one Slytherin who hadn't joined in the hero-worship. Obvious why.

"Aw, what's the matter, Marls." Deanna taunted her. "Upset that I whipped your precious Gilderoy into submission?"

"You could say that." Marlie produced her wand. "You totally humiliated him! In front of everyone! His reputation'll be shattered!"

"What reputation?"

Marlie's face was going redder by the second. "Oh, and now you have to insult him too! Honestly, Tyler, when do you ever stop?"

"When I'm bored." Deanna grinned. "So, you want revenge do you? OK then. Come and take it." She twirled her wand in a theatrical gesture and got ready for action. Marlie wasted no time on the formalities, but leapt straight into action.

Deanna realised too late that perhaps she'd been a bit hasty. This wasn't Lockhart. This wasn't even Malfoy. It certainly wasn't some over reckless Gryffindor looking to try their luck. This was Marlie Lovegood who had fought alongside her on occasions too numerous to count, whose duelling skills, although frequently overlooked by the rest of the school, weren't far off Deanna's own, and who, most importantly, knew all Deanna's favourite tactics. For the first time in her life, Deanna was facing an opponent who was pretty much her equal. And it showed.

Hex after hex came flying her way, and it was all Deanna could do to block them, never mind fight back. The curses she did manage to fling Marlie's way were deflected easily. It swiftly dawned on Deanna that perhaps this had been a mistake.

Finally, Deanna came to a decision. There was no way she was going to win a fight against Marlie using magical means. Dodging a particularly virulent version of the Jelly-Legs Curse, she did what she should have done in the first place; one Disarming Charm later and Marlie was wandless.

Marlie shrieked in fury, staring helplessly after her wand as it went flying into the distance. However, she was nothing if not resourceful. Before Deanna even had time

to draw breath, Marlie had launched herself at her, grabbing her by the wrist and wrestling her to the ground.

"That's cheating!" Deanna shouted at her.

"Yeah. Got a problem?" snarled Marlie as she snatched Deanna's wand out of her hand and sent it flying after her own.

"You little... Alright, Lovegood, you want a fight, you got one!" Deanna grabbed Marlie by the hair and with that, the fight began in earnest.

Sadly for them both, everyone else was just winding up their duels and dusting themselves down. Harry and Draco, who had ended up getting paired together, were the only other two still fighting, and even that was now being broken up by Snape. So it wasn't long before attention turned towards them.

"Miss Tyler." came Snape's voice. Neither girl heard him. He repeated himself, this time louder. Still no answer.

"DEANNA!" This time, they both heard him. Marlie, who had caught Deanna in a headlock, let go of her immediately. Both of them hauled themselves to their feet and began looking rather sheepish. Snape had that effect.

"When you've both quite finished making fools of yourselves." That menacing tone brought hostilities to an end at once. Marlie and Deanna both muttered "Sorry, sir." and hastily began straightening up each other's robes and brushing the dust off. Snape, satisfied that they were both suitably chastened, turned away. The two girls turned to each other, caught each other's eyes and stifled giggles.

"I think we both got a bit carried away there, didn't we?" murmured Deanna.

"Er, yeah, you could say that." grinned Marlie, having gone rather pink. "Fun though, wasn't it?"

"Oh yeah. You were good, you know."

Marlie tossed her hair with pride. "Of course. I learnt from the best, after all." She paused, seeing Deanna looking bewildered. "That's you, by the way."

"Oh. Right. I knew that."

Now that the duels had concluded, Lockhart was calling for a volunteer pair so he could demonstrate blocking spells.

"What, like the blocks you used so well against Deanna?" remarked Rianne, just loudly enough for most of them to hear. Lockhart didn't seem to hear her, although Rianne could have sworn she saw Snape's mouth twitch at the corners. He didn't say anything to her though. Instead, he stepped forward, picking out Draco and Harry.

The two boys face each other, the atmosphere between them alive with malevolence. Snape leaned forward and whispered something to Draco, who began smirking in a way that meant nothing but trouble.

Luella drew closer to Rianne. "Do you think they'll be alright?"

"Course they will. Snape wouldn't let any harm come to a student. Would he?" Luella could tell that Rianne wasn't entirely happy about this either.

"Not to Malfoy, no. But he hates Harry..."

Rianne's confident facade gave way to Slytherin practicality. "Oh gods. Wands out. This could get nasty."

Deanna and Marlie, whose minds had been working along much the same lines, joined them, having now retrieved their wands. Bracing themselves, they settled down to watch the fight.

"Three, two one, go!"

Draco lost no time getting the first blow in. "*Serpensortia!*" The crowd drew back, shrieks and gasps of horror echoing around the room. A huge black snake had exploded out of Draco's wand and was now coiled in front of Harry, raising its head up and looking like it was about to strike. Marlie screamed and hid behind Deanna. She'd always hated snakes. Luella, watching it, wondered why. OK, so it was fanged, poisonous and probably about to bite someone. And yet, it looked strangely cute, in a slithering and venomous kind of way. Luella briefly wondered what the chances were of her parents letting her have one. Not high, she suspected. And the chances of Marlie letting her bring one anywhere near Hogwarts were non-existent.

"Don't move, Potter. I'll get rid of it." Snape raised his wand leisurely, clearly enjoying himself just a little too much.

Unfortunately for Harry, Lockhart got there first. One blast of magic later, and the snake went flying ten feet in the air, heading straight for Marlie. Terrified of snakes she might be, but Marlie was still a Slytherin and she had enough presence of mind to grab a nearby Hufflepuff boy and thrust him into the snake's path instead.

The snake hit the floor with a horrifying smack. Luella gasped in shock.

"Oh my god, is it OK?" She noticed the looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her.

"Lu, if your first concern is for a deadly, fanged, venomous, extremely dangerous serpent, then to be honest, I'm rather more worried about you." commented Rianne.

Deanna was characteristically more forthright in her opinion. "You, girlie, are disturbed."

They turned their attention back to the snake. It had reared up in front of the Hufflepuff, even more annoyed, and looked as if it was preparing to strike. Luella turned to Harry.

"Don't just stand there, do something!" she begged him. Last thing they needed was a death on their hands.

Harry didn't hesitate. He leapt forward, brandishing his wand at the snake and shouting "Leave him!"

And to everyone's surprise, the snake did just that. It backed off, curled up and lay docile on the floor. Luella let out the breath she had been holding and looked at the snake again. No doubt about it, it was definitely cute. I want one, she thought.

Snape stepped forward and made the snake disappear, much to Luella's disappointment. She'd been half hoping they'd let her keep it. Maybe if she asked Malfoy how to do that spell...

She turned to Deanna, expecting to see her looking as relieved as she felt. To her surprise, Deanna was looking deeply concerned. She looked around. So was everyone else. In fact, Deanna's expression was probably the most benign one there. Everyone else seemed alternately confused, hostile or frightened.

Luella turned back to Harry, who seemed as puzzled as she felt. His eyes met hers. She shrugged and gave him a look of sympathy. He smiled weakly back, before Ron began tugging at the back of his cloak, dragging him away with Hermione's help, hustling him out of the Hall.

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The gathering broke up shortly after that. Everyone seemed too freaked out to want to continue.

The four girls headed back for the Serpents' Nest. Luella decided that enough was enough. What was everyone so worked up about?

"So what was all that about?" she asked, genuinely bewildered.

"Your guess is as good as mine." said Deanna, her face more grim than anyone had ever seen it. "How on earth did someone reared by Muggles learn Parseltongue, I'd like to know!"

"*Parseltongue?*" Luella's confusion was not helped in the slightest.

"The language of snakes." said Rianne. "Harry was speaking to that snake in it."

"He was?" Now Luella was really confused. It had sounded perfectly normal to her.

"Course he was, Lu, didn't you hear him?" Marlie asked, puzzled. "It's not like it wasn't loud enough, after all. Gods know what he was saying. Could have been trying to encourage it for all we know."

"He wasn't." Luella had never liked hearing Harry picked on, and she wasn't about to let her friends get away with it now.

Deanna was now looking strangely at her too. "What do you mean, he wasn't?"

"You mean, you couldn't hear it?" Luella asked in surprise.

Deanna shook her head. "Lu, he was speaking Parseltongue. Only snakes and Parselmouths can understand it."

Luella stood firm. "Well, I don't know what was up with you lot, but it sounded perfectly clear to me. Snake goes for that Hufflepuff kid, Harry leaps in and tells it to back off and it does. What? Stop looking at me like that!" All three of them were staring at her in varying degrees of horror and backing nervously away.

"You knew what he was saying." Marlie's voice was oddly devoid of emotion, as if she were struggling to keep it level.

"Yes, that's because he was speaking in English. Don't tell me I can't recognise my own language when I hear it." Luella went on to the defensive. What the hell was wrong with them?

"You heard the words in English?" Rianne's voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Well, yeah. Didn't you?" Luella looked at the three stunned faces before her. All three of them shook their heads.

"We just heard him using Parseltongue." whispered Deanna.

Luella began to feel distinctly queasy. "But... I heard him. I heard him say 'Leave him'. I did! What?" She stared wildly at each of them in turn, their faces getting ever more fearful. "What's wrong? Will one of you please tell me?"

Deanna and Rianne looked at each other, nodded, and each took hold of one of Luella's arms, frogmarching her swiftly towards the dungeons.

"Don't say a word, keep your voice down, and come with us." snapped Deanna, in a voice there was no arguing with. "We need to talk."

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Chapter Eleven Of Snakes and Slytherins

Not a word was said on the way to the Slytherin dorm. Luella still hadn't got a clue what was going on. OK, so it appeared she could understand the language of snakes. However, she still couldn't work out why her friends were reacting the way they had. After all, if Snape could talk to Deanna's falcon without anyone minding, what was so bad about being able to talk to snakes? She couldn't be the only one, surely. Could she? Well, apart from Harry, anyway. She made a note to go and talk to him afterwards, let him know that she was still on his side if no one else was.

They finally arrived at the dorm after the tensest ten minutes of Luella's life. Deanna and Marlie ushered her into the dorm, while Rianne shut and locked the door behind them. Luella found herself sat down in one of the chairs while the other three arranged themselves about her. They all looked very serious.

"So. Would one of you three mind telling me what this is all about?" said Luella, rather more sharply than she'd intended. The tension was beginning to get to her by this stage.

"You're a Parselmouth." said Marlie. No feeling, no sign of recognition in those cold, blue eyes of hers. No sign that the two of them had hung around together, worked together, played together throughout the last four years.

"I kind of gathered that." snapped Luella. "I'm more interested in why the three of you are now looking at me like I've just killed your entire families."

No one laughed. In fact, they were exchanging rather nervous looks as if they were worried she might.

"You don't have a clue, do you?" whispered Deanna. "You haven't the faintest idea what this means, have you?"

"No!" Luella nearly screamed at them. "I haven't! Now will the three of you snap out of it and tell me what the hell is going on? I mean, what is so bad about being able to talk to snakes anyhow?"

Rianne took a deep breath before replying. "It's bad news because it's not generally considered a talent possessed by good mages. In fact, it's historically been the preserve of the Dark Side. And not just your average tin-pot Dark Mages either. Parseltongue is linked to the most evil Dark Mages of them all."

"Which ones?" Luella asked, already guessing the answer.

"Salazar Slytherin regarded it as a speciality of his. The only other mage definitely known to possess it in this country..." Rianne hesitated before gathering her courage. "The only other mage known to have it was You-Know-Who."

"There's only one good mage known to possess it." Deanna took up the mantle of Bringer of Bad News. "One and one alone. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin."

"Salazar Slytherin's daughter." Luella whispered, her mind beginning to grasp what was going on. "The one who came up with the Redeemer Prophecy."

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "And now, we can add Harry Potter and you to the list."

"To the list of good mages or bad?" inquired Marlie, her tone of voice indicating that she was not at all sure which one Harry and Luella belonged in.

"Good mages, of course." snapped Deanna, although there was a lingering doubt in her eyes too which Luella was not slow to pick up on. Deanna was far easier to read than most Slytherins and Luella, never exactly unobservant, knew Deanna's reactions as well as her own.

It was Rianne who seemed least bothered by it all.

"Harry Potter is no Dark Mage. He hasn't got the imagination. And as for Lu being evil..." She turned on Deanna and Marlie with a look in her eyes that caused them both to shrink back from her in fright. "How could you think that for a second? Haven't you known her for long enough to know that's not true? Especially you, Tyler." Deanna looked away guiltily. Rianne continued, her wrath only slightly assuaged. "OK, so she's a Parselmouth. But what were you expecting? She's Slytherin Redeemer. The Heir of Slytherin." She spoke slowly, letting every word have time to fully sink in. "Of course she has talents linked with Salazar and You-Know-Who. In fact, come to think of it, I'd be far more surprised if she didn't. Morgan had it too, it's not the preserve of Dark Mages. Luella Martin is no Dark Witch. No more than any of us."

Deanna and Marlie were staring at the floor in contrition. Rianne's forthrightness had stung them into silence.

"Sorry, Rianne." Marlie mumbled.

"Yeah, of course Lu's not evil. How could we ever have doubted her? Sorry, Lu." Deanna lifted her eyes to meet Luella's, smiling hopefully.

"No worries." Luella replied, still a little shaken that they'd not trusted her.

"So what do we do now?" Marlie asked. "Evil or not, we can't just leave this."

"I'd say go to Snape." sighed Rianne, checking her watch. "Except it's far too late now. And we do have Potions first thing tomorrow. So I'd recommend getting some sleep. Tomorrow, after Potions finishes, we go and talk to him. And then we can take things from there. How's that?"

"Superb." yawned Marlie.

"Yeah, good thinking." Deanna said, rubbing her eyes. "Snapey'll know what to do."

Luella wasn't quite so sanguine. She had a horrible feeling that Snape's interest wouldn't stop with the Parseltongue. As the other three climbed into bed, she traced her fingers over the Mark on her arm and shivered.

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The next morning saw them all arriving at breakfast the next day as if nothing had happened. Rianne had instructed them all to act normal so as not to arouse anyone's suspicions. Then they could go to Potions as usual, and talk to Snape in private afterwards. So that, with all the self-control Slytherins were capable of, was what they did.

Luella, however, couldn't let it rest without doing just one little thing. She'd seen the way the rest of the school was reacting to Harry. They were all at pains to avoid him, and even Draco didn't seem to want to tease him. Things were getting pretty bad when even your worst enemy was scared of you.

As soon as breakfast finished, Luella took advantage of the crowds to work her way over to him without anyone noticing her.

"Hey, Harry." she greeted him.

"Hey Lu." he smiled back. Luella was not slow to spot the relief behind it. Not far away, Ron and Hermione were watching the two of them, Hermione pulling Ron back as if to give them some privacy.

"How've you been?" she asked awkwardly. Now that she was here, she wasn't quite sure what to say.

"Could be better." said Harry. His face turned serious. "Lu, you don't... I mean, you don't think... oh hell. You don't think I was telling that snake to attack Justin, do you?"

"Justin? Oh, right, him." Luella, able to tell various herbs apart blindfold, did not have the same ability when it came to Hufflepuff second years. "No, of course not Harry. It was perfectly obvious to me that you were telling it to back down. I don't know what all the fuss is about."

Harry's face lit up. "Thank you! I am so pleased you said that! Thank god there's one person who doesn't think I'm the Heir of Slytherin." Doubt flitted across his face. "You don't, do you?"

Luella burst out laughing with the irony of it all. "You? Heir of Slytherin? No way! Harry, I can categorically state that there is more chance of Professor McGonagall getting a tattoo and joining the Hell's Angels than you being the Heir of Slytherin. Heck, *I'm* more likely to be Heir of Slytherin than you." Now that was certainly true.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right." Harry seemed to regain his confidence. In fact, he was positively strutting. "I can't be the Heir of Slytherin, surely. I should stop worrying. I'll tell Justin what really happened and the whole thing'll just blow over. Thanks, Lu.

You know, I hoped you'd understand. You didn't look anything like as terrified as everyone else. In fact, you looked as confused as I was. Almost as if..." He was looking at her rather thoughtfully. Luella swiftly changed the subject.

"Well, I'd better get going." she said hastily. "I've got Potions next and you know how Snape is with latecomers. Even Slytherins. Bye." And with that, she raced off in search of her friends.

Harry watched her go, all sorts of thoughts running through his head as Ron and Hermione joined him.

"So what did she want then?" Ron asked, in the usual surly and cynical mood that Luella's presence invariably invoked.

Harry pulled his friends aside so no one would hear them and lowered his voice.

"I think Lu might be a Parselmouth too."

"What on earth gives you that idea?" gasped Hermione, clearly sceptical.

"Last night." Harry told them both. "She was the only one, *the only one*, who didn't look scared. She just looked confused. As if she could understand what I'd said to it and didn't know why everyone else was so upset. That would explain why she was comforting me - she knows exactly what I said to that snake and wanted to make sure I didn't get too down. You know, the more I think about it, the more it makes sense." Harry seemed quite taken with this idea.

Hermione was less thrilled about it. "And where's Lu going to learn Parseltongue? She's a Muggle-born. She's hardly descended from Slytherin, is she?"

"She's in his house though." said Ron darkly. "All it would take is for one descendant to turn out a squib and there you have it - the possibility of Muggle-born Heirs."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ron, for the last time, stop harping on about Lu being the Heir of Slytherin. She's a perfectly nice girl. Honestly, you're obsessed with the idea. Come on, let's get back to the common room. Herbology's been cancelled so we've got a free lesson. Come on." She ushered both boys away in the direction of Gryffindor Tower. The conversation soon turned to other things, and Harry and Hermione soon forgot about Luella being a Parselmouth. Ron, however, couldn't stop thinking about the idea.

It made sense. It made perfect sense. Luella Martin, a Parselmouth and no doubt Heir of Slytherin too. It explained why she'd left the feast and been found at the scene of the first attack. It explained what Deanna and Rianne had been referring to - they must have had their suspicions, if they hadn't known for sure. And it went a long way towards explaining Luella's confidence that Harry wasn't the Heir. "I'm more likely to be Heir of Slytherin than you." Well, how deeply ironic, Martin, Ron thought. And now we both know that it also happens to be true. Ron quickened his pace as they neared the Gryffindor Tower entrance. Going to a teacher was out of the question, at least for now. After all, he didn't really have a lot of evidence yet. However, now he

knew, he could certainly keep an eye on her. Weren't they planning to infiltrate the Slytherin common room after all? Well, he could certainly make use of the opportunity to do a little digging around. However, he began to wonder whether it might not be a good idea to impersonate Marlie Lovegood, Deanna Tyler and Rianne Stormosi instead of Crabbe and Goyle...

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"What happened to you?" Deanna asked as Luella rejoined them, cursing quietly at her own stupidity.

"Harry knows." was the brusque response.

"Knows what?" asked Marlie. "There's so many secrets about you for him to find out, after all."

"He knows I'm a Parselmouth." Luella lowered her voice to avoid anyone else hearing. "I just went over to tell him not to worry, I didn't think he'd deliberately set the snake on that kid, and he realised that I'd known what he was saying."

"Oh for god's sake."

"Bloody hell, Lu!"

"Lu Martin, you are a complete and utter prat!"

The expressions on her friends' faces ran the gamut of emotions from exasperation to... well, actually that was pretty much it. Exasperated summed it up.

"I'm sorry!" Luella tried to defend herself. "I just felt sorry for everyone thinking that he's some Dark Mage so I thought I'd comfort him."

"And now we've got someone else in on the deal. Nice one, Lu!" snapped Deanna.

"Look, it's only Harry!" Luella protested. "It's not like Malfoy found out or anything. Harry won't tell anyone. And he's a friend of mine."

"I know, I know, but this isn't the sort of thing we want everyone else knowing!" Deanna sighed. "Better if Harry's out of it."

"Anyway, Harry and Hermione might be your mates, but Ron hates you." Rianne pointed out. "First thing Harry will do is tell them both, and then we have the problem of Ron Weasley knowing something about you which he could do all sorts of nasty things with. Would you trust him in that sort of situation? Because I wouldn't!"

"She's right." said Marlie. "Ron's a cool bloke with people he likes, but with people he hates, he's a nasty vindictive piece of work. He's almost as bad as Malfoy. Worse, in a way. At least Malfoy gets it all out of his system by mistreating people he hates. Ron's too fundamentally decent to sink to that level, so he lets it all build up inside until he can't control it anymore. And you know what Gryffindors are like at self-control..."

No one said anything as they let that image sink in. Yes, they all knew exactly what Gryffindors were like at self-control.

"Bloody hell." Luella moaned. "I'm doomed."

"Well, he might not use it against you." said Deanna, ever the optimist. "I mean, he is a Gryffindor."

"Might is not as good as won't." said Rianne, for whom optimism was something other people did. "Still, no help for it now. Come on, we'd better get to Potions. Don't want to keep Snape waiting." She led the way to the dungeons, Deanna, Marlie and a despondent Luella trailing in her wake.

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The lesson started normally enough. The four of them were the last to arrive, and Snape was just getting the lesson underway.

"Nice of you four to put in an appearance at last." he remarked, glancing irritably at his watch.

"Sorry, sir." gasped Rianne. "We got held up in the corridors. Won't happen again."

"Glad to hear it. Now sit down." He turned back to the blackboard as the four of them took their seats. "Weasley, while I am sure Miss Tyler is more than worthy of your adulation I must ask you not to do it in my class. Five points from Gryffindor."

Fred, caught in the middle of punching the air and whispering "Go, Tyler!", sat down in frustration. How on earth had Snape seen him?

Severus couldn't help smiling as he looked in the mirror concealed by a well-placed Invisibility Charm. An invaluable teaching aid, which enabled him to keep an eye on the class even when his back was turned. Another movement caught his eye. Lucas Vettinari thumping the desk and muttering something under his breath. How odd. That was the third time this week that a Slytherin had done that in class, and both occasions had been just after he'd taken points off Gryffindor. Most strange. Why a Slytherin would be annoyed at Gryffindor losing points, he had no idea. However, he was sure there was some logical explanation.

"Lost your stake, did you Lucas?" Deanna murmured with a grin. "Never mind. Better luck next time."

"I'd swear you two rig this." Lucas muttered back. "I don't think I've won it once yet. And Rianne over there bloody wins it every time she plays."

"If only I knew how to rig it, mate." sighed Deanna. "As for Ri, I don't know what her secret is, but Marls and I have had to restrict her participation. Looks bad if a friend of the organisers keeps winning."

"I still think that the whole thing's unethical." said Luella with a frown. "Honestly, you're not meant to be using school discipline as a way of making money!"

"Lighten up, Lu!" Deanna nudged her playfully in the ribs. "It's just a bit of harmless fun."

"That's what you think!" hissed Luella. "Did you know that half the house has been deliberately getting Gryffindors into trouble so as to get closer to their sweepstake total? Only the other day, we had Blaise Zabini sabotaging Lavender Brown's Shrinking Potion. Bloody thing went green and started chucking out poisonous fumes. We could have had a nasty accident!"

"Oops." Deanna did not, however, look sorry.

"Then there's all the Slytherins who've been undercutting each other to make sure Slytherin's final tally doesn't go over! Deanna, you're making a mockery of school rules!"

Deanna turned to the two Slytherin boys in front. "Hear that, lads? I'm making a mockery of the discipline system."

"Since when have you ever done anything else?" asked Alex Lynch in confusion.

"At least this way we're getting money out of it. Correction, everyone else appears to be making money out of it." Lucas's irritation over never winning took precedence over teasing Luella. "I'm losing Sickles hand over fist. So, Deanna. Are you open to bribery, or is this thing genuinely unfixable?"

"I'm hardly likely to go to Snape and ask him if he'll take precisely thirty seven points off Gryffindor this week, am I?" retorted Deanna. "He'll guess what I'm up to and put a stop to it. Either that or he'll want a cut of the winnings."

"I still wouldn't put it past you." muttered Lucas as he returned to his note-taking.

Either Snape hadn't noticed their whispered conversation, or, more likely, hadn't cared. Regardless, he'd continued writing on the board and now had them making a mild Ageing Potion. It was then that it happened.

Luella stifled a scream and clapped a hand to her arm as the pain hit her. Deanna dropped her Potions tools at once.

"Lu? What is it?"

"Nothing." gasped Luella, her eyes watering from the pain. "I'm fine. Really."

"Fine? Lu, if that's fine then Lockhart's a champion dueller. I'm getting Snape over here."

"No!" Luella cried, but it was too late. Deanna was already standing up and gesturing frantically to Snape. However, he was busy telling off Alicia Spinnet and hadn't

noticed Deanna calling him. Finally, Deanna drew her wand in frustration. Time for another trick that she'd learnt from her mother.

The Attention-Grabbing Charm shot into the air with a scream and exploded, with a very loud bang and a shower of green sparks. Everyone turned to look, their hands over their ears. Well, Deanna reflected, it wasn't really meant to be used in confined spaces after all. However, that wasn't important right now.

Snape was striding over to her, eyes blazing with fury. "Deanna Tyler, what on earth do you think you are doing? That particular piece of magic is not meant for use indoors! And it's certainly not meant to be used in my lesson. It could prove extremely dangerous. Do you mind telling me what you think you're playing at?"

Deanna remained unfazed. "Sir, Luella's not well. Her arm's burning."

Snape's anger dissolved in an instant, much as Deanna had hoped it would. "Miss Martin?" He turned to Luella. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah." whispered Luella, trying to act as if her arm didn't feel as if it had been dipped in acid.

"You don't look it." Snape looked as if he were doing some very quick thinking. "Right. Miss Tyler, Miss Martin, Miss Lovegood, Miss Stormosi, in my office now. The rest of you should pack up your things and return to your common rooms. Miss Martin has spilt some of her potion on herself. I'll need to prepare an antidote for her. It could take some time, so this lesson is cancelled. Go back to your common rooms, and stay together! I don't want you wandering around the school. You four, with me."

Deanna and Rianne took Luella by the arms and hauled her after Snape into his office, the looks on their faces clearly indicating that it was about time this got sorted out. Marlie followed behind, wand out just in case Luella tried to make a dash for it, although it also had the handy effect of discouraging any awkward questions. Not that there were any. The words "Potions is cancelled" were not ones you argued with in case Snape changed his mind.

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Snape ushered them all in to his office and closed the door. Luella felt her heart sink as she heard the lock click. Evidently he didn't mean to let her go without getting to the bottom of this. Which pretty much meant that the game was up. She sighed, taking a last look at her friends. Would they still be that way in half an hours time, when she'd no doubt be packing her bags for home? She doubted it. Tears came to her eyes and it wasn't just from the pain in her arm.

She was barely aware of being made to sit down, and of Deanna and Rianne letting go of her. Then Professor Snape kneeling next to her. Slowly, the pain began to fade away, and she was able to open her eyes.

"Show me your arm." he was saying.

"It's stopped hurting now." said Luella, hoping against hope that he'd be satisfied with that and not probe any further. No chance.

"Good, that's one thing off my mind. But I still want a look at that arm." His voice was not one you argued with. However, Luella was just desperate enough to try.

"No, look, it's OK." she stammered as she got to her feet and headed for the door. It seems fine now, so I'll just be on my way."

"Luella." Snape's hand shot out and caught her wrist. "I don't want to have to hurt you or humiliate you, but unless you let me have a look at your arm, you will leave me no choice. Now. Show me that arm."

Luella stared helplessly at her friends. Deanna was standing apart from them all, hiding her eyes, her entire posture giving out the unmistakable message that although she wanted no part in this, nor would she raise a hand to stop it. Marlie by contrast wasn't taking her eyes off her, her face cold, wand out and her attitude one of not only wanting this to go ahead, but being more than willing to assist if need be. Shivering, Luella turned to Rianne.

Slowly, Rianne raised her eyes to Luella's. She was shocked to read there, not coldness, but pain and fear. Rarely did you see Rianne admitting she was afraid.

"Lu, for gods' sake, just show him your arm." she whispered, her voice cracking up. "I can't believe that even now you're still trying to struggle on your own. Just spare my nerves and show him, alright?"

Luella hung her head in defeat. Rianne was right. No point fighting, really. Plus she'd not thought at all how her friends must have been feeling.

"Alright." she heard herself say. "Alright, I'll show you." She gave Deanna one last pleading look, begging her to understand. "Forgive me." She pulled her wrist out of Snape's grip, and began rolling her sleeve up, exposing the Mark on her arm for all to see. Closing her eyes so she didn't have to see the looks on their faces when they saw it, she sat down and let them examine it.

To her surprise, she didn't hear screams and cries of repulsion.

Just Rianne breathing "What the hell is that?"

And Marlie replying "I don't know, but it looks pretty cool."

And strangest of all, Deanna saying "I have no idea what it is, but I'll tell you this - it's on our coat of arms."

Luella opened her eyes. "It's what? On your coat of arms?"

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "It's got four quarters and a different symbol on each one - a red dragon, a total solar eclipse, the inevitable peregrine falcon and that thing. Never did work out what it was."

Luella couldn't take it in. "The Tal-y-Rhys coat of arms has a Dark Mark on it?"

The first inkling that she'd said something wrong was Rianne and Marlie staring at her in confusion, and Deanna looking highly offended.

"No it bloody hasn't!" snapped Deanna. "That's not a Dark Mark, you prat."

"It isn't?" asked Luella, relief beginning to spread through her.

"Hardly." said Snape, who was still on his knees, staring at the Mark as if in a trance. "Quite the reverse. It's a caduceus."

"A what?" asked Marlie blankly.

"I knew that." said Deanna.

"It's the wand given by Apollo to Mercury in exchange for the gift of music." Snape explained, tracing his fingers around the serpentine shapes of Luella's Mark. "It granted him access to all the worlds, those of the gods, mortals and the dead, and opened up the secrets of magic for him. It is said that he was the one who derived the arts of magic we all use today and taught them to humankind using the caduceus. It's one of the most powerful symbols of healing and transformation there is. And it is as far from the Dark Mark as you could possibly get." He let go of Luella's arm and began going through various cupboards. "I need a mirror, I'm sure there was one here somewhere."

Marlie rummaged through her bag and came up with a small hand mirror. "Will this do?"

Snape took it from her. "A little small, but it will serve our purposes. Thank you, Miss Lovegood." Kneeling down again, he placed the mirror next to her arm, allowing her to see the Mark properly. "There. Look well, Slytherin Redeemer. See the symbol of your destiny and your power. And on seeing it, accept them both."

Luella looked at it, curious now. Ever since it's mysterious appearance, she'd shrunk from it in fear and loathing. Not now she knew what it really was. It was a golden rod topped with something that resembled a Golden Snitch. However, far more interesting to her eyes were the two snakes entwined round it, one black, one white, in a serpentine double-helix that, far from inspiring fear, was actually rather fascinating to look at.

"Wow." she whispered.

"Indeed." smiled Snape, returning the mirror to Marlie. He got up and returned to his chair. "It appeared on Halloween, did it not?"

"Yeah." Luella nodded.

Snape did not seem surprised. "It would have done. The night the Chamber was opened."

"So the Chamber of Secrets gets opened and Lu gets a funky new snake tattoo. This might sound a little off the wall, but would someone mind explaining why?" Rianne's usual deadpan style was back.

"I'll do my best." Snape promised. "The caduceus is an ancient symbol, but not so very long ago, a young witch who felt she needed the power it offered adopted it as her personal Mark. You all know her name. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin."

"What, Redeemer Prophecy chick Morgan?" asked Marlie, wide-eyed.

"The very same." said Snape, amused.

"So that's why it's on our coat of arms!" said Deanna, enlightenment dawning. "But what's that got to do with Lu?"

"Everything." Snape's smile vanished. "When Salazar was defeated, and created the Chamber, he set magic around it, powerful magic. One of the spells was that when his true Heir opened it, Salazar's symbol would appear on his arm, marking him out as the Chosen One. Once the Mark was in place, he would assume his true power as Heir of Slytherin and be able to pursue his destiny. That Heir was Lord Voldemort. And sure enough, when the Chamber was opened last time, Salazar's Mark appeared on his arm. You know it better as the Dark Mark." He paused, letting that sink in.

Deanna was first to speak. "So where does that leave Lu? After all, she's Heir of Slytherin too."

"Very true." Snape's silky tones were quiet, but they had a resonance you could not ignore. "But it was never said which Slytherin."

Rianne arrived at the answer in a flash. "She's not Salazar's Heir at all, she's Morgan's! And that's why the caduceus appeared on her arm when the Chamber was opened. It was a wake-up call for her. You-Know-Who has Salazar's Dark Mark, and Lu's got Morgan's Mark."

"Oh well done, Miss Stormosi." Snape's eyes danced with delight. Rianne grinned, looking rather smug. "You are quite right. Morgan couldn't undo what her father had done, but she could give future generations a fighting chance. So she added magic of her own to the Chamber, spells mirroring those of her father. She must have primed it so that when it was opened by her Heir, that Heir would be marked by her insignia, then laid down a prophecy that would ensure all would happen according to plan. Most think of her as a great Seer, but what they forget is that she was a very powerful Tal-y-Rhys, and witches like that don't just see the future, they shape it. I don't think she was predicting the future when she made that prophecy. She was giving it instructions."

"Oh gods." sighed Deanna. "That's all we need, my great-great-great-times-whatever-grandmother telling us all what to do. Our only hope is that she's nothing like my mum."

"Why, what's so bad about Caitlin?" asked Luella.

Deanna rolled her eyes as if to say 'you need to ask?'. "Lu, my mum's a lovely person and a very talented Auror, but she's also got this really twisted sense of humour. And if Morgan's the same way, I'm really not looking forward to this."

"I am sure Morgan Tal-y-Rhys knew what she was doing." murmured Snape, soothing Deanna's anxieties. "Luella, I wouldn't worry any more. Nothing evil can touch that symbol - it's got powers we can only imagine. Don't fear it. See it as your shield, your totem. See it as your seal of authority. You are officially the Heir now. Morgan's crowned you with her own personal Mark."

"But it wasn't me who opened the Chamber." whispered Luella.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be." said Snape. "Maybe it was just necessary for another to open it while you were in the building. Didn't you feel as if you were being summoned?"

"Yeah, I could hear this woman's voice calling me." Luella recalled what had happened that night, her new knowledge casting a whole new light on it. "Morgan! Her magic must have kicked in as soon as the Chamber opened, and it started calling me over so I could use its power. And that explains why it burned last time, every time the Chamber's opened I can feel it."

Snape was nodding, seeming to understand. "I suppose you're a Parselmouth too?"

They all started at this. What with everything else, they'd forgotten about the Duelling Club.

"Er, yeah." Luella admitted. "Is that good?"

"It's inevitable. Both Salazar and Morgan had that talent. Only natural their Heirs should have it too. I knew you had it as soon as I saw your reaction to the snake last night. Only Parselmouths look at snakes as if they were sweet, cuddly animals."

"But they are!" Luella protested.

"Alright, Lu, now you're freaking me out." said Marlie, backing away.

"I rest my case." said Snape, suppressing a smile. "And then there was the fact that you and you alone were not frightened or surprised when Potter spoke to it. That merely confirmed it. Don't be alarmed, it's a perfectly natural talent. However, I would advise you not to advertise the fact - most mages are apt to feel uneasy around Parselmouths, as Potter is about to find out." At this, a rather nasty smile began to spread across his features.

"OK, so that's Lu explained." said Marlie. "But what about Harry? Why's he a Parselmouth?"

"My dear Miss Lovegood, as to that, I am none the wiser. However, I'm sure there's a perfectly logical explanation." The smile vanished as he got up, his manner now brisk and efficient. "You four had best go back to the Serpents' Nest. If the Mark burned not

long ago, then whoever's been opening the Chamber could well be at large as we speak. Which is why I instructed your fellow students to stay in a large group and go straight back, not that I have too many hopes of them obeying me. Stay there until your next lesson, understand?"

"Loud and clear sir." said Rianne as she got to her feet. "Right you three. Get moving." And with that, she ushered them out of the office.

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Surprisingly, the other students in the class had actually done as they'd been told and gone straight back to their common rooms. After all, there was a blizzard raging outside, it wasn't exactly warm inside, and few of them felt like studying.

Hermione and Ron glanced up in surprise to see the Gryffindor fourth year arrive. Ron checked his watch.

"What are you lot doing back here? Shouldn't you be in class? Not like Snape to let you out early."

Fred flung himself into a nearby chair and put his feet up on a table, cocky as ever.

"Got cancelled." he grinned at them.

"What?" gasped Hermione. "Why?"

"Cancelled?" If Ron's jaw had dropped any lower it would have been scraping the floor. "Your Potions lesson got cancelled? You lucky bastards. You lucky, lucky, lucky, LUCKY bastards!"

"Aren't we just?" George draped himself over the back of his twin's chair, easily matching him in the smug stakes. "Luella Martin spilt her Potion over herself and burnt her arm in the process. Snape called the lesson to a halt so he could sort her out with an antidote. Cool, eh?"

"Nice one!" Ron turned to Hermione. "Bet he wouldn't have done that for one of us. If it had been anyone else, he'd just have told them to go to the hospital wing."

"Well, it got us out of Potions, so who cares." replied Fred. "Hmm, something to bear in mind. Hey George, remind me to bribe Tyler next time, bet she'd be up for it."

"Never mind that." snapped Hermione. "How is Lu? Is she alright? What potion were you doing?"

"Erm..." Fred turned to shout across the common room at Angelina. "Hey! Ange! What potion were we doing just now?"

"Ageing potion, you moron." came Angelina's rather unimpressed South London tones. "You know, the mild one that only ages you up one year per dose. Honestly Fred, can't believe you've forgotten already."

"Well, you know I never bother paying attention in Snape's classes." Fred responded.
"There you go, Mione. The mild Ageing Potion. As for Luella, don't worry about her. Doubt there's anything wrong with her that Madam Pomfrey can't sort out. Catch you both later." He sauntered off to play Exploding Snap with George and Lee Jordan.

Ron was still shaking his head in disbelief, unable to believe his brothers' luck. "Can you credit it? All the times we've had injuries in our Potions lessons, and he's never cancelled a class, not once. Then Little Miss Teacher's Pet Martin gets a tiny little injury and the entire class gets sent off so he can make sure she's alright. Typical bloody Slytherins, eh Mione? Mione?" Hermione hadn't answered. Instead, she was staring into space frowning.

"Oh bloody hell." sighed Ron. "Mione! Snap out of it, woman! Rejoin the human race and talk to me!"

"Eh? What?" Hermione blinked and looked around distractedly before turning back to Ron. "What is it? I was thinking."

"You're always thinking. It's not good for you. What was it this time?"

"About that Ageing Potion that Lu got burned by." Hermione retrieved her Potions book from her bag and looked up the recipe. "Yes, here it is." She pointed out the ingredients to him. "As I thought. It's not toxic. Not even irritating. Not at any stage of its preparation. If Lu spilt some on herself, all that should happen is that she gets wet and possibly stains her robes. It shouldn't need treating."

"It shouldn't?" Ron's interest had been fired into action by this. "So why's Snape calling off lessons all of a sudden? I mean, he must know it's not toxic."

"I don't know." replied Hermione, not at all her usual self-confident self. "I really don't know. But I'm not at all sure I like this."

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Apart from a few general enquiries after Luella's health, several words of congratulations for having got them out of doing work and more than a few grumblings from those whose chances of having won anything in the sweepstake had been adversely affected, no one really asked any awkward questions about Snape's admittedly out of character behaviour. As Fred had so rightly put it, when Snape cancelled his lessons, you didn't argue in case he changed his mind. Even if you were a Slytherin.

The four girls made use of the unexpected free time by retreating to their dorm to discuss developments. Marlie in particular was most taken by Luella's Redeemer Mark, as it had now been christened.

"For the last time, Marlie, no I am not giving you one!" Luella snapped at her. "No! I don't care how well it would go with your black t-shirt! You are not having a Redeemer Mark!"

"Oh, Lu. Please! Go on, say you will." Marlie turned on the charm, hoping Luella would give in like she usually did. Unfortunately, Luella's mind was made up.

"No. Marlie, it's a very powerful symbol that can repel all evil and some say can even bring the dead back to life. It's not a fashion accessory!"

"Exactly! A tattoo that looks great with my entire wardrobe and does cool stuff too! What more could anyone want?" Marlie seemed surprised that anyone could think of it differently. Luella could only groan and turn to Deanna and Rianne for support.

"Will one of you please tell her why she can't have one? She's driving me nuts!"

"Marlie. Five words. Your mum will kill you. And I can't see your dad being overwhelmed by it either. Hey, that's a point. Worked out what you're going to tell your parents yet?" Rianne asked. Luella didn't answer. Rianne gave her her most penetrating gaze. "You are going to tell them, aren't you?"

"No. Come on, Ri, you are joking aren't you?" Luella could only shake her head in amazement at how the mind of your average pure-blood worked sometimes. "Ri, they're Muggles! They were bad enough when they found out I was a witch. Took Caitlin's Glamoury powers to win them over."

"It's true. I was there." Deanna added. "First time I've ever seen Lu sulk and throw a tantrum."

"You? Threw a tantrum?" Marlie stared in shock. That didn't sound at all like the Luella Martin she knew.

"Yeah. Look, I was eleven and I wanted to go to Hogwarts with Deanna, alright? I was entitled, I think. Anyway, no I'm not telling them about the Mark. That would involve explaining about the whole Redeemer thing, they'd only worry and make a fuss, and they'd probably insist on withdrawing me from Hogwarts. No, it's probably best that they don't know. They're only Muggles. It's not their fight. I don't want them involved." Luella suddenly began to feel very alone as the full implications of all this dawned on her. It truly wasn't their fight. They couldn't help her. And if Voldemort ever came calling, they couldn't protect her. She pulled her cloak around her in a futile attempt to block out the fear and restore some semblance of being a normal teenager. It didn't work.

"Damn Voldemort." she whispered, frustration and anger beginning to rise. "Damn him! And damn Morgan too! How dare she pick me out for this! What the hell did I do to get landed with this!" She began to pace up and down the dorm, feeling cheated. Cheated of a normal adolescence, cheated of a normal life, literally marked out as different from her peers, denied the comforting awareness of most teenagers that no matter how bad things got, they'd always have a secure home life waiting for them, parents to pick up the pieces and sort things out for them. Whereas she was dealing with something no one should be expected to struggle with alone and she couldn't even talk to hers about it.

"Someone please tell me why the hell I got chosen? Did I ask for the hand of destiny to come and catapult me into centre stage? Did I ask to be singled out as special?"

"Well, actually, once or twice you did." Deanna pointed out. "I distinctly remember us both on several occasions going on about how we hated Surrey, and you definitely said you'd like nothing better than to find out you were really royalty or something. Anything that was more interesting than middle-class Surrey."

"That is NOT what I meant and you know it!" snarled Luella. She rolled up her sleeve to reveal the Mark again. "Look at it. Look at it! Contrary to popular belief, it is not a cool new fashion accessory. It's not some new fad. It is not designed to set off my hair, my eyes or the latest sleeveless tops from Tammy Girl! I didn't ask for it, it got put there! Painfully! Still want one, Marls? Because you're welcome to it! Believe me, if I could transfer it over to you, I would." She sank down on the bed, her rage having burned itself out, leaving her with just misery to indulge in. "Believe me, if I could get out of this I would. God, I'd love to get rid of this... this thing!" She covered up the Mark in one swift, brutal movement, before curling up, head hidden behind her knees.

It was Deanna who got up to comfort her. "Hey. Hey, Lu. It's OK. I'm here. I'll look after you. Don't cry, mate. I'll help you. Every step of the way, you know I will."

"What are you going to do, duel him?" Lu's voice was muffled, but the sarcasm came across loud and clear. "This is Voldie we're talking about here, not Gilderoy Lockhart."

Deanna suppressed the urge to giggle. Clearly Luella couldn't be too upset if she could still manage witty quips and one-liners.

"Maybe not. But give me time. When I've done all my Auror training, I'll be unbeatable. Voldie watch out!"

Luella looked up. Her eyes were still red-rimmed and tear-stained but she was smiling.

"Thanks mate." She pulled Deanna into an embrace, face buried on Deanna's shoulder. Behind her, she was dimly aware of Rianne sitting down, tracing her fingers through her hair.

"See, Lu? It'll be OK. You've got me and Marls rooting for you. And you've got Tyler on your side. Gods know I wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her. Rather You-Know-Who's enemy than hers."

Luella couldn't help chuckling. Now there was an image. Death Eaters invading Hogwarts at six in the morning and slinking out with their tails between their legs after getting yelled at by Deanna. The scary thing was, she could see it happening too.

And then there was Marlie sitting down on her left, one hand resting gingerly on her shoulder, as if she was worried anything more would be turned away.

"Lu." Now that was unusual. Marlie Lovegood sounding timid. "Lu, about what I said earlier. About wanting a Redeemer Mark. I'm sorry. It was completely insensitive. Can you forgive me?"

"Course I can, Marls." Luella murmured. "Where would we be without your vanity and shallowness to cheer us up and make us feel superior?"

Marlie ignored the teasing, relief that Luella seemed to be OK outweighing any desire to get even. However, she was too much the Slytherin to let it go entirely.

"After all, there's a bit too much white and gold in it. Doesn't really suit my skin. Now, if you could come up with one in black and dark green..."

Luella let go of Deanna and sat up, looking Marlie straight in the eye. While there was certainly a hint of mischievousness there, you could never be sure with Marlie. Best to be on the safe side.

"Rianne," Luella said, just a little too calmly, "pass me a pillow, would you?"

Rianne did so, eyes longing to ask why, but her tongue too shy to speak. Luella took it from her, again quite calmly.

"Thank you." Luella took the pillow in her arms, held it for a few seconds, then in one fluid movement, the expression on her face not changing once, she swung it round and hit Marlie squarely in the face with it.

Marlie shrieked, the blow sending her sprawling over the bed. For a second or two, she lay where she'd fallen, too stunned to react. Then...

"Luella Martin, I'll get you for that!" In no time at all, Luella's other pillow had been appropriated and revenge exacted.

This time, it was Luella's turn to stare into space for a bit. However, she was not in shock long, and within minutes a full-scale pillow fight had broken out.

Deanna and Rianne sat back, observing the two of them fight.

"You know, that looks kinda fun." Rianne commented.

"It does, doesn't it?" Deanna agreed. "And that reminds me. Marlie and I never did settle that duel last night. Rianne, if you'd care to join me...?"

Rianne nodded, and without further ado, both girls had seized pillows from their own beds and joined in. Marlie and Luella both yelled and swore as they found themselves under attack from behind.

"Oh, so you want a fight, do you?" shouted Marlie, brandishing her pillow. "Alright then. Bring it on!"

Luella by contrast wasted no energy on words. One well-timed blow later and Deanna had been sent sprawling.

From there, things escalated into all-out war, with alliances being made and then broken, and any kind of code of conduct being ruthlessly shredded to pieces and made a mockery of. No, not even a pillow fight could go ahead without cheating when Slytherins got involved. It was brought to a halt only by the bell signalling morning break.

More than a few eyebrows were raised as the girls emerged into their common room.

"What happened to you?" asked Kat Stormosi, looking her sister up and down in amazement.

Rianne carefully plucked a feather out of her hair. "Marlie Lovegood and Deanna Tyler caught me in a pincer movement on Lu's bed. A massacre was prevented only by Luella's timely ambush from behind on Marlie, leaving me free to deal with Tyler. By the way, DT, you've got feathers all over your back."

"Have I? Damn." Deanna hastily began brushing her robes ineffectually. Luella stepped in and began using Banishing Charms on her.

"You were having a pillow fight? Remind me how old you are again, Ri?" Kat was beginning to smirk at Rianne in that typical big sister way of hers.

"There is nothing wrong with indulging in a little fun from time to time." Rianne, standing on her dignity, was in no mood to let Kat get to her. "Anyway, those two started it." She indicated Luella and Marlie, who were now Banishing the feathers off their own robes.

"Less of the we, thank you very much." snapped Marlie, as she de-feathered Luella's hair. "I seem to remember this one getting the first blow in."

"Now you're not going to tell me that that remark of yours didn't warrant it?" Luella grinned, her spirits well and truly restored. For a while at least, she'd been an ordinary teenager again.

Sadly, it didn't last. Kat was well and truly on her high horse.

"Well, while you four *children*," here a pitying gaze at her sister, "were off playing, the rest of us in the real world had important things to deal with. Did you know there'd been another attack?"

That killed the levity. Luella felt her heart sink. Of course. They'd all been so preoccupied with what the Mark meant that they'd forgotten why it had burned that morning.

"Who?" whispered Luella, her mind screaming please, don't let it be anyone I know.

"That Hufflepuff kid that Potter set the snake on last night. But that's not the scariest bit." Kat leaned forward, eager to impress her audience with the latest gossip.

"What's the scary bit?" whispered Marlie, ever ready to be impressed.

"Potter did it. It's true! He got found at the scene of the crime, with the kid's body in front of him. McGonagall dragged him off to Dumbledore's office. They're probably expelling him right now."

"No!" Luella shouted, almost without being aware of what she was doing. "It's not him, it can't be! They can't expel him, they just can't!"

"Lu, wait!" called Marlie, but it was too late. Luella had wriggled out of Marlie's grasp and bolted for the door.

"What's up with her?" Kat asked, confused.

"Harry Potter's a mate of hers." Rianne explained with a sigh. "Come on, you three. We'd better go after her. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid." The three of them headed for the door.

Rianne opened it, nearly colliding with a small, red haired figure in the process.

"Oh! Ginny. Didn't see you there." She took a closer look at the first year. She looked very pale and was trembling all over. Now while it was certainly cold in the school, it wasn't that cold. Especially not in the dungeons, where it never got chillier than ten degrees Centigrade even during the worst winters. "Are you alright? You look awful."

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." Ginny tried to smile. "Had a bit of a cold this morning, so I went up to see Madam Pomfrey. What are you three up to?"

"Just off to track down Luella." Marlie told her. "She's in a bit of a state. Did you know there's been another attack?"

Ginny clasped her hands to her cheek, going even paler. "A-another one?" she squeaked.

"Yeah." Deanna nodded. "And that's not even the worst of it. They reckon Harry Potter did it. See, the victim was that Hufflepuff kid who that snake nearly attacked last night, and Harry was found at the scene, and well, now everyone thinks he was finishing the job."

Ginny gasped in horror, seeming close to tears. Marlie reached for her necklace out of habit. Something not right here. In fact, she couldn't help thinking that Ginny reminded her of someone, although she couldn't think who. Ah well. It would come to her.

"Harry Potter? No!" Ginny whispered. "But... they can't expel him. He defeated You-Know-Who! It's not him, it can't be!"

"Well, of course not." Rianne said, trying to reassure her. "And I'm sure Dumbledore won't expel him on the basis of rumour and circumstantial evidence. Don't worry, Ginny. We're off to track him down now and find out what happened. We'll let you know, promise."

Ginny nodded, her lower lip trembling. Marlie gave her a cuddle.

"Don't be scared, Gin. It'll be OK. Dumbledore'll sort it all out, you'll see. Come on, you guys.", she let Ginny go, "Let's go find Lu."

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Luella was in too much of a state to think about where she was heading, which was probably a good thing. If she'd stopped to think, she'd have realised that she didn't have a clue where to even start looking. She had no idea where Dumbledore's office was, and she certainly didn't have a clue where the Gryffindor common room was. If she had to guess, she'd have said up near Professor McGonagall's office, but even then that didn't really help her.

Fortunately, her instincts seemed to know exactly where to go. It wasn't long before she ran into Harry in the Charms corridor. Unfortunately, Fred and George had got to him first.

"Make way for the Heir of Slytherin!" she heard Fred shouting.

"Seriously evil Dark Wizard coming through!" George was laughing.

Normally, Luella would have told them both off. However, relief at finding Harry outweighed anything else just then.

"Harry! Oh my god, are you alright?" Without waiting for an answer, she pushed past the twins and flung her arms round the boy.

"Oooh!! Harry's got a girlfriend, Harry's got a girlfriend!" Fred and George began chanting. Harry pulled himself loose, blushing furiously.

"She's not my girlfriend!" he snapped at them both.

"Of course not Harry." Fred grinned.

"Don't suppose the Heir of Slytherin's got time for a girlfriend anyway. What with trying to take over the school and all." mused George.

"He is not the Heir of Slytherin!" Luella yelled at them both, the ferocity on her voice surprising even her. Both twins stepped back, the levity gone.

"OK OK, we're sorry! Blimey, Lu, no need to shout."

"Yeah, we were just teasing him. No harm meant or anything." George tried his most conciliatory smile. Luella was only slightly pacified.

"Well, don't! It's not a laughing matter!" She turned back to Harry. "Are you OK? I mean, they didn't... you're not...." She broke off, unable to say it out loud. The dread word 'expelled' wasn't something you said out loud.

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore doesn't think it was me. I'm not in trouble."

Luella could have collapsed with relief. "Thank god. Thank god!" She reached out and gave him another hug. However, this time her Slytherin reflexes brought her to her senses. Getting all emotional? In public? Was she out of her mind? She let him go again, suddenly rather embarrassed. Strangely enough though, Harry hadn't seemed to mind, although he had removed his glasses and was now rubbing his eyes, as if trying to get used to the idea of being spontaneously hugged by a Slytherin.

"Anyway, I, erm, just wanted to make sure you were alright. I mean, you wouldn't believe the rumours flying round the Slytherin common room at the moment. Just wanted to find out what really happened. And I just wanted to let you know that I still don't think it was you. I know you wouldn't hurt anyone. Well, apart from Malfoy, but that doesn't count. Hell, I've hit Malfoy before now."

"Is he a git to you as well?" Harry asked. "Glad to see it isn't just me."

"You get it worst for some reason, but yes, he's horrible to lots of people, including his own housemates. Especially Deanna, she's one of the few who won't take any crap from him. Plus there's that little matter of her getting his mates' older sibs expelled in her first year."

"She did? Really? Wow!" Harry was looking very impressed, his own troubles forgotten. "Hey, is there any way she could do it again with Malfoy and co? Just as a matter of interest, you know."

"I'll see what I can do." Luella promised, her mood restored by the knowledge that despite what everyone was saying, Harry wasn't going to get expelled any time soon. "Anyway, I'd better go and pass on the good news to everyone else. See you around. And you two," here she turned to Fred and George, "stop teasing him! The poor boy's suffered enough!"

"Yes Ma'am." Fred saluted, clicking his heel together.

"Your wish is our command." George bowed. "By the way, is Lovegood willing to talk to Fred yet? He's kind of missing her- ow!" He clutched his head as his brother gave him a sharp smack.

"Ignore him, Luella." Fred was saying as he bundled his brother away. "He's always teasing. See you!"

"They're terrible, aren't they?" laughed Luella. "Almost as bad to each other as they are to the rest of us."

"I don't mind them." Harry replied. "Quite like it, really - I'm glad they don't believe it's me. I'm glad you don't either." He fell silent and for a moment, the two of them

just stood there, staring at each other, neither sure what to say. At length, Harry broke the silence and took Luella's hand. "It means a lot to me, you know. Knowing you trust me. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Luella felt herself blushing. Stop it at once, she told herself. He's just a kid, not even as tall as you, why on earth are you blushing? You're the Heir of Morgan, start acting like it!

"Anyway, I'd better go. You must have stuff to do. See ya, Harry." Luella withdrew her hand from his and left, trying to wipe the stupid and most unSlytherin grin that was threatening to get out off her face.

Stop smiling, woman! she heard this little voice snarling at her. He's a twelve year old Gryffindor, he has no idea what you are and he'd probably run in fright if he did! Why should his opinion matter? And yet, despite everything, despite the fact that on the surface, things were not really any better than they had been that morning, Luella couldn't help feeling happier than she'd done for a long time.

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Ginny, on the other hand, couldn't have been feeling worse. She looked up to Harry Potter as much as she had Ron. More, in fact - she hadn't spent half her childhood getting teased by Harry. And Ron, love him as she did, had never defeated a Dark Lord. And now Harry was accused of being one himself?

But it's not true! It can't be! she thought to herself. And then that nasty, niggling voice started up again. Of course not, it was saying. Of course it isn't him. We all know who it really is, don't we?

Shut up! she thought, tears springing to her eyes. Where is my diary, I need my diary. Tom'll know what to do...

Curling up on her bed, she reached for the small black book that had been her constant companion since her arrival at Hogwarts. To this day, she still didn't know where it had come from. She'd found it in amongst her school books after getting home from Diagon Alley and assumed it must have found its way in there by accident. She'd meant to hand it in to her parents, she really had, but she'd never got round to it and once she'd discovered its secret, she'd decided not to bother. After all, nice as Lydia and Autumn were, there were things she couldn't discuss with them. Things she couldn't even talk about to Marlie. Things like how lonely she felt sometimes, knowing that her brothers hated her, that her parents, despite their comforting letters, didn't love her quite as much as they once had, and that Harry Potter wouldn't look twice at her now. And more recently, rather more disturbing things. Picking up her quill, she began to write.

Oh Tom. I'm so frightened! It's happened again. There's been another attack.

And then the diary, her magical diary, began to reveal its secret, the special secret that made her loath to give it up. This diary could write back.

There, there, Ginny. Don't be scared. Tell me all about it.

Ginny plucked up her courage and began scribbling furiously.

Remember how I told you last night about the Duelling Club? And how Harry was a Parselmouth?

I remember. You said how he'd spoken Parseltongue to a snake that was about to attack another student.

Well, things just got worse. The student in question was the one that got attacked. And you know what was really bad? They found Harry at the scene! McGonagall's dragged him off to Dumbledore's office now. Marlie and Deanna think he might get expelled! Gods, Tom, I'm so worried!

Ginny laid her quill down so she could wipe the tears away. Taking a few deep breaths, she composed herself and continued.

The worst thing about all of this is that I don't remember where I was. Again. I had another one of my blackouts. I remember being in the dorm this morning, telling Autumn and Lydia I didn't feel well and that I might go and see Madam Pomfrey. They left, and that's all I remember until I came to in the middle of one of the corridors, covered in chicken feathers. Oh Tom, I'm so scared it was me! I'm so scared that I... that I... might be the Heir. You know. The Heir of Slytherin. I mean, I've been having blackouts since the start of term. Kept having what I thought were weird dreams, then waking up in the dorm fully dressed and with feathers all over me. Then on Halloween, I didn't feel well enough to go the feast, so I fell asleep in here then woke up covered in paint. And when Colin Creevey got attacked, I had nightmares that night too, then woke up standing and dressed. Then there's this morning. Three attacks, Tom! Three of them, and each time I black out then come to somewhere other than where I fell asleep. Each time, I don't remember where I was or what I was doing. And to cap it all off, Lydia tells me that there's an old prophecy saying the Second Heir of Slytherin is due to appear at this time, and that she'll be a girl. It's me, isn't it? I just know it is!

The writing faded away, and soon, the diary was writing back, in calm, measured tones that seemed almost as if they were designed to cope with hysterical eleven year olds.

Hush now, child. How do you know you're the Heir of Slytherin?

But... But I must be, if I'm causing the attacks.

Now, now. There's no evidence whatsoever that you are causing the attacks. After all, no one's seen you do it. You don't recall doing them. Alright, so you've not been yourself lately. But don't you think you've got every right to be a little stressed? After all, your brothers are ready to disown you and you said yourself you can't face seeing your parents again. And then there's that nice Harry Potter who barely noticed you before and is unlikely to look twice now. You've had a lot to be upset about lately, it's understandable you've not been well, and that you've been having scary dreams that

you can't remember. I wouldn't be surprised if you've been sleepwalking too. Come now, Ginny, if you were the Heir, you'd consciously remember attacking those Muggle-borns, wouldn't you? You'd have planned it in meticulous detail, and you'd be sitting in the common room afterwards gloating over it and planning your next move. Wouldn't you?

I... I suppose so. Ginny's hysteria had faded a little. Tom did have a point. The Heir of Slytherin would be able to remember what she'd done, after all. And she had been under a lot of stress lately, maybe she had just been sleepwalking.

Of course you would, Ginny. Now you stop worrying. You'll only make things worse. Just calm down and go about your business as normal.

You don't think I should tell anyone? I mean, I don't want Harry to get expelled.

I'm sure they won't expel Harry unless they're sure it was him. As for you, no, don't tell anyone. There's no evidence you were involved so why incriminate yourself? No, far better to keep quiet. No sense getting all worked up over a bit of sleepwalking.

No. No, you're right. Everything'll be fine. It'll all blow over, I'm sure. Thanks, Tom! You've really put my mind at rest!

No trouble, Ginny. No trouble at all.

However, as Ginny closed the diary and put it back in its usual hiding place, the doubts began to creep back. Maybe she should tell someone. But who?

The door opened and Lydia wandered in, presumably to collect her things for the next lesson, which, Ginny realised with a groan, was Potions. Not that she didn't like the lesson, but Snape had a way of making you want to confess every wrong thing you'd ever done and beg forgiveness. The other girl noticed her there and smiled.

"Hey, Gin. Feeling better? Reckon you'll be up to a lesson with the Snapemeister?"

"Maybe." Ginny swung her feet onto the floor and reached for her own Potions equipment. After all, Tom had said act normal, and she didn't want to give Snape a reason to be suspicious.

"That's the spirit." said Lydia, stashing her ingredients into her cauldron. "Besides, you're rather good at Potions - we need all the points we can get given that he cancelled Lu Martin's lesson. Damn it, that class is always good for points - I'll never make my sweepstake score now. Which reminds me. Heard the goss?"

"What, about the latest attack? Yeah, Marlie told me. You don't think it really was Harry, do you?" Ginny was desperate both for concrete news and an accurate reading of the rumour temperature, and Lydia Vetinari was invariably a good source for both.

"Who can say?" she shrugged. "I personally don't think it was him - it just seems too obvious, and besides, he's a Gryffindor. When they go bad, it's usually obvious and he seems OK. Dumbledore doesn't seem to think it was him either - Autumn and I ran

into Lu Martin on the way in here and she reckons he hasn't been expelled or anything. On the other hand, everyone else seems all too willing to believe it. You wouldn't believe the rumours I've heard this morning, and that was before the attack."

"Poor Harry." whispered Ginny. "I hope he's alright."

"He'll be fine." Lydia said as she began gathering Autumn's cauldron and ingredients. "They're not punishing him, it's the holidays soon anyway, he'll just have a rather uncomfortable week until it all blows over, which these things usually do. Come on, let's go. Autumn's waiting for us in the common room. Well, I say waiting. Desperately trying to finish off that assignment before the lesson starts would be more accurate. Done yours?"

"Yeah, it's finished." One thing Ginny did like about Hogwarts was Potions lessons and not just because it was an opportunity for easy points. For some reason, it came quite naturally to her. In fact, she really couldn't see why Ron had always moaned about it. It was far and away the easiest subject on the curriculum and Snape wasn't nearly as bad as her brothers had made him out to be. In fact, he seemed to like her. Certainly he'd always been perfectly polite to her. Maybe Marlie or Deanna had had a word with him or something. Whatever, it meant that Potions was not the weekly torment that her brothers had made it out to be, for which she was eternally grateful. She had enough on her plate to deal with without Snape being sarcastic at her.

"In that case, watch out. Autumn'll want to copy. Honestly, she's terrible. I know it's Snape but even so..." Lydia gathered up everything and swept out. Ginny followed her, grinning as she listened to Lydia complaining about Autumn Montague's endless procrastination. Now that she knew Harry wasn't going to be expelled, her mood had picked up considerably. However, she couldn't rid her mind entirely of the suspicion that maybe, just maybe, Tom's insistence on keeping things quiet was given with something other than her best interests at heart.

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As Lydia had predicted, the Slytherin common room was alive with rumours and speculation. And when Professor Snape pinned up the list for those who were staying at Hogwarts over the holidays to sign, the stampede to sign it was notable by its absence. Three days before the holidays and not one name up there.

"So. Nice and lively Serpents' Nest over the holidays, I don't think." Draco mused. "Honestly, anyone would think we were living in a danger zone." He turned to face the rest of the Slytherins. "Come on, you lot, where's your sense of adventure?"

"Strangely enough, Malfoy, I'd quite like to have a restful holiday. Without having to look over my shoulder constantly in case the Heir of Slytherin's right behind me waiting to stab me in the back and haul me off to the Chamber of Secrets." Marlie retorted from the black bean chair where she was writing the last of her Christmas cards.

"Lovegood. Heir. Of. Slytherin. He's one of us, you idiot! We'll be safe." Draco shook his head in disbelief at his cousin's naivete.

"We might be. She won't." sneered Pansy, looking up from the bit of last minute homework she was doing. "Her dad's a Muggle, isn't he? She'll be first in line. Not surprised she's running home to Mummy."

"When you've quite finished insulting my family." Marlie's voice was calm, but the acid in her tones made up for the lack of emotion. "If Muggle things are that filthy, you clearly won't want that personal CD player you ordered then, will you? Gods forbid I should pollute your no doubt wonderful home with that disgusting Muggle technology."

It was quite strange how Pansy backed down at this. "Ah, now, Marlene, let's not be hasty about these things. I was merely commenting to Draco here as to how owing to your no doubt honourable Muggle ancestry, you were in just that bit more danger than the rest of us. That's all." Pansy's conciliatory smile began to crack as the hysteria beneath surfaced. "So I'm sorry for any implication that I was insulting your family or indeed Muggles in general, so please don't cancel my order for a CD player."

"Alright." Marlie shrugged. She wasn't convinced but money was money and she'd never been one to go back on a deal. "You'll get your CD player. Which reminds me, Draco, you're overdue on a payment for your stereo system. Those things don't come cheap, you know."

"Can I pay you after Christmas, cous? I'm a bit short at the moment - had lots of presents to buy, see. I'll be loaded in January."

"You'd better. Or come the summer I'll be repossessing it." Marlie warned him.

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "You ordered a stereo system? What, one of the big ones with huge speakers and more lights and buttons than Mission Control?"

"Yeah." Draco shifted uncomfortably. "What? They're cool things to have, alright? Almost as cool as a Nintendo console. What???"

"Nothing, Draco, nothing." sighed Pansy, exchanging looks with Millicent and Blaise. "Honestly, anyone would think he's Muggle-born sometimes, the amount he's been going on about Muggle stuff this term. Next thing you know, he'll start wearing those scratchy blue trouser things underneath his robes. What are they called, Levvys or something? **MILICENT GET THAT BLOODY CAT AWAY FROM MY HOMEWORK!!**" She shoved frantically at Millicent Bulstrode's scruffy grey mongrel tom cat, Mr. Flibble, who was currently showing an undue interest in Pansy's Herbology assignment.

Millicent scooped him up, hurt. Despite her usual unsentimental practicality, there was a huge blind spot in her awareness where her beloved cat was concerned.

"He's just being curious! Aren't you, Mr. Flibbly-wibbly-woo? Yes, you are, darling!" She tickled the cat under its chin, oblivious to its struggles to get away, which were covering her robes in cat hair. Pansy could only groan as she thumped the desk in frustration.

"Not you too! Honestly, are all my friends going soft or something? Blaise, please tell me you're still worthy of being Slyth. Blaise? Blaise!"

Blaise Zabini blinked as she seemed to snap out of whatever trance she'd been in.
"Did you say something, Pansy?"

"Blaise." Pansy struggled to keep her voice level, beginning to have horrible feelings about whatever it was that Blaise had been thinking about. "What were you staring at?"

Blaise blushed and looked away. "Oh, er, nothing, Pansy."

Pansy's voice became dangerously quiet. "Blaise. Tell me. Now."

There was no arguing with Pansy when she spoke to you like that. Blaise swallowed nervously.

"Erm, I was just looking at Draco and wondering what he'd look like in those Levvy things you were talking about. Quite cute, I'd imagine."

"AARRGHH!" Pansy screamed in frustration, burying her head in her arms and sobbing in despair.

Draco himself was paying no attention. He was more concerned with the as yet empty list on the notice board.

"It's really very disappointing, you know. I had hoped some of you lot would be brave enough to stick it out. But no. You all turn out to be a bunch of wusses after all."

"I notice you haven't put your name down." Marlie remarked, idly watching the progress of one of the blobs in the lava lamp on the table next to her.

"Lovegood, if you think I'm spending Christmas on my own, you're very much mistaken. Hello, what's this?"

Ginny had emerged from the corridor leading to the girls' dorms with a quill in her hand and a zombie-like expression. Without saying a word or acknowledging anyone, she shuffled up to the notice board and signed her name on the list, before turning away and walking off again.

Draco watched her go, beginning to grin. "Well, well, well. I'd forgotten about the Slytherin Weasel. So our little convert doesn't want to go home, does she? Afraid of what her parents'll say when they see her, is she? Well, we can't have her spending Christmas all alone, can we?" Without further ado, he'd borrowed a quill off Pansy and signed his own name beneath Ginny's, before offering it to Crabbe and Goyle. "Come on you two, sign up. Let's give Ginny a bit of company, shall we?" Crabbe and Goyle signed the list and Draco handed the quill back to Pansy, looking rather pleased with himself.

"Draco!" snapped Marlie. "You little..." She turned to Deanna, who was too preoccupied with one of the plasma globes to have noticed anything amiss. "Tyler, snap out of it. Ginny's decided to stay here over Christmas, with only Malfoy and friends for company. We have to do something!"

"Aren't her friends staying over?" Deanna inquired, busy making pretty plasma patterns.

"Good point." Marlie got up and went off in search of Lydia and Autumn, who were discovering the joys of Jenga. "Hey, you two. Did you know Ginny's staying here over Christmas? All on her own?"

"Yeah." Lydia replied, carefully removing a block from a particularly tricky position. "We tried to talk her out of it, but she insisted. Said she can't face Christmas dinner with just her parents, as her brothers are all staying too. So she's staying put."

"We did say she could come home with one of us if she wanted." Autumn added. "It's not like there isn't plenty of room, after all. But no, she turned us down. Said she couldn't put us out like that, and she'd stay here. We tried, we really did."

"You could have stayed over yourselves." Marlie's voice carried just a hint of menace. Autumn was not slow to pick up on it.

"What, and get picked off by the Heir of Slytherin? No thanks."

"Do either of you care about Ginny at all?" Marlie glared at them both. So much for solidarity. Why, when Deanna had decided to stay over to entrap Crabbe and Goyle's older sibs, Rianne and Lu had volunteered to stay and help without a second thought.

"Sure we do!" said Lydia. "But she's been acting so weird lately, it's been near impossible to help her! She's being so moody and self-pitying, there's no point. Anything we say gets the same 'no, no, I'm quite alright' response and a depressed sigh. We have tried asking what's wrong, we have tried inviting her over to ours over the holidays, and we did actually offer to stay and keep her company, but she told us not to worry about her, just to go home and enjoy ourselves. Marlie, we've tried, we really have, but she's not making it easy for us!"

Marlie fingered her necklace. Lydia seemed to be telling the truth, and Ginny certainly had looked pretty depressed just now.

"Alright, alright, I believe you." Marlie sighed with frustration. Now what? If Ginny's friends had tried every way they could think of trying to snap Ginny out of her depressed state, what could she do? Force some company on her?

Deanna turned round furiously as Marlie slapped her on the back.

"What?" she snapped at her. "I'm busy!"

"Playing with *my* customised plasma globe?" Marlie raised an eyebrow. "Explain to me the definition of 'busy' that falls under some time, would you? But never mind that. This is important."

"It had better be. What is it, is Snape on to the sweepstake or something?"

Marlie shook her head. "No. It's Ginny. She's staying over on her own. With only Malfoy and cronies for company."

"She's not!"

"She is. Doesn't want to go home for obvious reasons, won't stay with one of her friends, and goes all self-pitying Jewish Mother on them when they offer to stay over with her."

"Bloody hell." sighed Deanna. "Well, what are you going to do? Drag her back to yours?"

"No. Far too much effort involved. I'm staying over with her."

That got Deanna's full attention. "You most certainly are not!"

"Why not?" Marlie bristled. "I can't leave her on her own! I promised I'd look after her! I'm not leaving her all alone with Malfoy - who knows what could happen."

"And who knows what could happen to you! Marlie, you're half-blood! It's not safe for you on your own!" Deanna urged. "OK, so you're OK when there's crowds of students surrounding you, and when the rest of us are around. But there'll be virtually no one here over Christmas. You'll probably be the only one here with any Muggle blood whatsoever. It'll be like walking around with a target on your back. Marls, I'm sorry, but I absolutely forbid you to stay here over the holidays."

"Well, do you have any better ideas?" hissed Marlie. "Because I don't, and I'd rather take my chances with the Heir of Slytherin than let Ginny take her chances alone with Malfoy!"

"Marlie, I understand your concerns perfectly, and I sympathise. But you're not staying over." Deanna took a deep breath and continued. "I am."

"You?" Marlie stared at her. "You'd really stay over to look after Ginny for me?"

Deanna nodded. "Yeah. Why not? I can stand up to Malfoy, no probs. And while I may not know who the man who conceived me is, I do know for sure that he's a wizard. I am therefore pure-blood and safe from any Muggle-hating Dark Arts types."

"Oh, Deanna, would you? Would you, really? Ah, thanks! You're such a good mate, you know that?" Marlie reached out and gave Deanna a hug in gratitude.

"I like to think so." Deanna replied, reaching for her quill.

She had just finished signing her name when Luella and Rianne turned up, fresh from raiding the library for books to use over the holidays.

"Whatcha doin', Tyler?" asked Rianne, peering over Deanna's shoulder.

Luella squirmed past her and saw Deanna's name on the list. "You're staying over? Why?"

Deanna tapped the first name on the list. "Ginny. I'm not leaving her alone with Malfoy."

"Well, you're not staying on your own. You against Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, that's hardly fair. I'll stay too." said Luella, swiftly arriving at a decision.

"You will not!" Deanna rounded on her with a ferocity that caused Luella to leap back in fright. "You're going home at the end of the week and there you'll stay until term starts again. I'm not having you here over the holidays at a time like this. It's too dangerous!"

"Dangerous? Oh come on, Deanna. What could possibly happen? I'm sure it's no more dangerous than during term time. Anyway," here Luella lowered her voice, "what has the Heir of Morgan to fear?"

"Me, if you don't stop being such an idiot." Deanna fumed at her. "You're not staying. I said it to Marlie and I'll say it to you. You're a lot more vulnerable when there's hardly anyone else around, like there will be over holidays. There's not the same safety in numbers. You'll be the only Muggle-born here, you'll be a Petrified kid walking. Sorry, Lu, but you are going home!"

"Deanna!" Luella protested. She decided to switch to pleading. "But we always spend Christmas together. It won't be the same without you. Deanna, please!"

Deanna looked away, clearly torn between what she wanted and what she knew was right. However, she wasn't the ethical pushover that Luella was.

"Lu, no. No, I mean it. Stop looking at me like that. You know I'd love to see you on Christmas Day, but it's not going to happen. Yes, I'll miss you too. No, I'm not giving in on this! You're not staying! And that's final! Ri, tell her."

"She's right. Lu, you're not seriously thinking of staying, are you? Are you mad? Do you have no concern for your own safety? Not to mention our nerves? Lu, there's no question. You're going home!"

"But, Ri..."

"No! I don't want to hear it! You're going!"

Luella gave in. If Deanna wasn't easy to get round, then Rianne was virtually impossible.

"Alright, alright, I'll go." she grumbled. "But what about you? Are you sure you'll be OK on your own?"

"She's not on her own." Marlie pointed out. "She's got Ginny."

"And she's got me." Rianne produced her own quill. "I'm staying too." She signed her name underneath Deanna's. "Well come on, I'm not one to leave you all alone on Christmas, am I?"

"You're staying too? Fantastic!" Deanna grinned. "Hey, thanks, Ri." She leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Between you and me, I'm rather glad I won't be on my own."

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Finally, the last day of term arrived, much to everyone's delight. This year in particular was one where most students couldn't wait to get away.

Lessons had finally concluded, the Slytherins had celebrated the previous evening with a Christmas party to remember, and now the entire Serpents' Nest was engaged in an orgy of packing and panicking as everyone tried to locate all the books they'd need, all the presents they'd bought for their families, and all the stuff they'd bought for their schoolfriends.

Even with half its occupants remaining at Hogwarts, the fourth year girls dorm was in a state of chaos, what with Marlie chasing around in a panic trying to get all her textbooks, designs, half-built gadgets and extensive collection of colour co-ordinated robes and accessories into one trunk, without success.

"But this all fitted when I brought it!" Marlie could be heard wailing.

"That's what they all say." muttered Rianne.

Deanna was proving to be a bit more helpful. "Well then it'll all fit back in somehow. Here, let me give you a hand. And if we really can't get it in, then I'll try a few Tardis charms on it. Come on, let's get to work."

Leaving them to it, Luella took full advantage of the confusion to slip away quietly. Before she left tomorrow, there was just one thing she wanted to do.

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Severus looked up in surprise as his office door opened. Rarely did he get visitors on the last day of term.

"Miss Martin?"

"Ah, you recognised me. How sweet." grinned Luella, in a good mood despite herself.

"Ah, she's been taking sarcasm lessons from Miss Tyler." Severus said, mimicking her tone of voice precisely. "What can I do for you then? You seem happy enough, so I assume that all is well in the world of today's teenagers."

"Everything's fine. Marlie's having problems getting her huge pile of stuff into her trunk, but that's nothing new, she has this problem every year."

"Has she considered getting a larger trunk?"

"She did. Her stuff seems to have expanded exponentially so it doesn't fit the new one either." Luella took a seat, recalling why she was here. "Anyway, enough about me. How are you feeling, sir?"

"Very well, thank you. I'm about to be rid of most of the school, and I'm looking forward to a peaceful holiday."

"You should be so lucky. Malfoy, Deanna and the Weasley twins are staying here. Sorry, sir." Luella did not look sorry in the slightest.

Severus shrugged. "At least I won't have to actually teach them." He looked at her curiously. "May I ask why you're inquiring after my wellbeing? Most of my students don't do that unless they want something."

Luella shook her head. "No, not this time. I just thought I'd see how you were before I left, wish you a Merry Christmas, that sort of thing." She hesitated before continuing. This could go one of two ways, and one of them would completely embarrass her. Maybe both of them. Still, she was here now. Might as well get on with it.

"Oh, and I thought I'd get you this." She produced a small white envelope and handed it to him.

He took it from her warily, as if expecting some kind of trap. Luella felt oddly hurt by this. Surely, surely, he knew her well enough by now to know that she wouldn't do that to him? She watched as he opened the envelope and carefully removed the contents.

It was an ordinary Christmas card, nothing more. With a picture of a raven on the front.

"Well, I knew you liked them." Luella said, blushing. Severus didn't answer. He was tilting the card this way and that, watching the raven on the front cover take off and fly away, then return to its original position as he moved it.

"It's a combination of the best of magic and Muggle." Luella explained. "Marlie showed me how to make holograms and I used a few Animation Charms too. Thought I'd make it stand out a bit for you."

Severus looked up and smiled at her. Not a sneer. Not the usual malicious grin. A smile. A proper smile. The smile that did strange and wonderful things to her, causing

her insides to start melting and a rather stupid and decidedly unSlytherin grin to start spreading across her face. He's happy! she thought. Because of something I did! Cool!

"I'm touched. Thank you." He flipped the card open and began to read. "Dear Professor, Wishing you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. Thanks for all the support you've given me this term - I'm grateful. Wouldn't have survived without you. Best Wishes, Luella Martin." He closed the card and propped it on his desk, turning to face her, an unusually gentle look in his eyes. "You didn't have to go to all that trouble on my account, you know. It is my job after all."

"I know." said Luella, trying to ignore the stab of pain she'd felt at those words. I don't want to be part of your job, she thought. I want you to help me because you care about me! "But I thought I'd get you something. Just that you always look so alone." She glanced around the darkened office, bereft of personal effects, the hearth empty. "Sir, do you ever have the fire on in here?"

"Not often. It's never that cold in here, and one gets used to it after a while. But then, you're not me, are you?" He raised his wand, and the fire sprang into life. Luella felt herself relaxing automatically. Nice. She looked at her teacher again. He was so cute in the firelight. Luella felt her heart go out to him. Was this going to be another one of those moments where the boundaries between them blurred, where the teacher-student dividing line, never that strong in their case, would give way a little, allowing their separate lives to touch, allowing her a glimpse of what could be? She hoped so.

He was looking at her card again. "Thanks for all the support you've given me - well, Luella, you've always needed it more than most. My only regret is that you didn't come to me sooner. Why didn't you, it seems so out of character for you. I could have told you what that sign meant straight away and saved us all a lot of worry." He replaced the card, looking straight into her eyes. Luella looked away, embarrassed suddenly.

"I don't know." she whispered. "I just... I just thought you'd turn away from me. After all, I didn't know what it was. It could have been a Dark Mark for all I knew. I thought you'd hate me. I thought you'd abandon me on the spot." Her voice trailed off. She looked up, and was surprised at the conflicting emotions she saw there. Ferocity mixed with surprise mixed with a tenderness that stung her right to the core.

"I'd never abandon you." The words were everything she'd hoped for, yet terrifying to hear. She didn't move as he reached across the desk and took her hand. "Even if it had been a Dark Mark. I know better than most that things are rarely what they seem." At these words, his eyes seemed to move away from her, as if he were contemplating some painful memory. "Yes, I know it far better than most." he whispered, before turning back to her. "Ah, Luella, how could you think I would think you capable of such evil? I know you're not! Child, very little short of you consciously going over to the dark side would make me turn against you. That I promise you. Luella, I care about you and would never, ever hate you for any reason other than your deliberate and wanton betrayal of everything I've ever taught you. If anything like that happens again, come straight to me. Don't wait. Don't try to solve it by yourself. Come to me. I'll do all I can to help you. You have my word." Both his hands were clasped around hers now, and those eyes were gazing right into hers, penetrating her mind,

penetrating her very soul. Stop, please, she silently begged him. Stop before you uncover my deepest secrets, stop before I lose control completely, stop before I melt into your arms...

"Yes," she heard herself whispering. "Yes, I'll come to you. I promise."

Content with that, he released her and leant back, the intensity fading. Luella breathed a sigh of relief. Thank god that was over, she didn't think she could take too many more incidents like that. And yet she could hardly wait for the next one.

"Anyway," he murmured, amused, "it was the least I could do. I've not forgotten the kindness you showed me this term either. For which I am grateful." The amusement vanished and the intensity returned. "Thank you."

"Hey, I'm Slytherin Redeemer, remember? Just doing my job." Luella grinned, somehow managing to retain her composure, despite the memories of that night which were flooding back to her. Forget? How could she possibly forget? Each and every night since had ended with her replaying it to herself over and over again, each time different and yet the same, each time that bit steamier... Stop that! she told herself. Not in front of him!

"Well, for my sanity's sake, I'm very glad you did!" Severus returned. "See, I know how it feels to fear that someone will run screaming when they find out what I really am. You didn't run. And for that reason alone, you need not fear me doing the same to you."

Luella nodded, trying to get her thoughts onto a topic that didn't involve him pulling her to the floor and kissing her senseless. It was quite strange, she thought, but he really did look just like Deanna when his usual cynical mask was down. How no one else had spotted the resemblance she didn't know, although she suspected that it might have something to do with the fact that for people to entertain the idea of Snape being a father, they first had to entertain the idea of him having had sex, and that was something that the minds of most students were simply not ready for.

"She'll accept you one day, you know." The words were out before she could stop them.

"Who will?" The wariness was back, it seemed.

"Deanna. You do look just like her, you know."

For the first time, she saw pain in his eyes and immediately wished she'd kept quiet.

"She won't." There was a certainty in his words, a calm, final certainty that indicated this was not something open to debate. "She is not you, Luella, and if she ever finds out what I did to her mother, she will kill me. Quite possibly literally. No, Luella, I don't think there's much hope I'll ever be able to tell her how I really feel, what she really is to me."

Luella hung her head. No, it didn't really seem likely. But if she could see the two of them reconciled as father and daughter, she would. It would be the one thing that would truly, irrevocably make him happy. And one thing that didn't look like happening any time soon. However, maybe there was something else she could do for him.

"I'll be seeing Caitlin quite a bit over the holidays. Is there anything you'd like me to say to her?"

Severus froze. Luella watched all the emotions in his eyes fighting for expression. However, in the end he gave way to none of them.

"No. No, there's nothing I want to say to her."

Luella didn't argue. For all her desire to make him happy, the thought of him and Caitlin Tyler on friendly terms brought up all kinds of less pleasant emotions. After all, how dare she hurt him like that? No, maybe it was for the best that he didn't want contact with her.

"Alright then." She got up to leave. "Well, I'd better get back to the packing. Won't do itself after all, although I'm sure there must be some charms somewhere that can help." She found herself smiling at him in a way which surely indicated something more than mere respect, but strangely enough, couldn't care less.

"No doubt. I would tell you what they are, but I think it would be more beneficial if you did the necessary research yourself. Even you could stand to increase your learning, Luella."

"I'll let it pass." Luella replied. "Besides, after all the homework I've been given, I'll have quite enough to do. Merry Christmas? Ha! I won't have time for Christmas..."

"I'm sure you'll find time for it all somehow." He was watching her, a rather cocky grin on his face which matched Deanna's inch for inch, muscle for muscle. This was beginning to get quite unnerving, seeing her best friend's mannerisms in someone she'd fallen in love with. Definitely time to end this conversation.

"Probably. But I won't if I waste any more time hanging around here. See you next year, sir."

"See you next year, Luella. It was good to talk to you. Thank you." Amusement slipped away as the seriousness returned. "Season's Greetings, Morgan's Heir. May the darkness not take you this Midwinter time."

The formality of it left Luella lost for words. However, from some dark recess of her mind, the correct response came to her.

"And may your powers wax as the Sun does, Son of the Tal-y-Rhys." Luella smiled at him, not even bothering to wonder how she'd known she was meant to say that.

"Morgan's Heir indeed." Wonder mixed with a healthy dash of pride. "You see, you are accepting it already. Congratulations."

Luella shrugged. "What happens, happens. It has its good points."

"Spoken like a true Slytherin." Wonder had distilled itself into pure pride. Luella returned his gaze unashamedly. If excelling as the Heir of Morgan was what it would take to get that reaction on a regular basis, then so be it. Besides, she'd never really failed at anything in her life before and she wasn't about to start now. Ah, Professor, she thought, I won't just make you proud of me. By the time I'm through, you'll feel nothing short of adoration.

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Chapter Twelve Christmas at Hogwarts, Slytherin Style

Finally, all the packing was completed, the last presents for family wrapped, the last cards and presents for schoolfriends handed out, and the holidays finally got underway.

The last of the coaches taking the departing students off to Hogsmeade station trundled off along the drive, leaving just a handful of students who had gone to see their friends off, Deanna and Rianne among them. And alongside them, a shivering and apprehensive Ginny.

"Well, that's them out of harm's way." Deanna commented as the three of them trudged back inside the now deserted castle. "Or at least, as far out of harm's way as Marlie ever gets."

"I wouldn't worry." Rianne said, calm as ever. "Lu'll keep her out of trouble and it's not like there's anyone else to encourage her to get up to mischief. You, Malfoy and the Weasley twins are all here."

"True." Deanna agreed. She turned to Ginny, who was trailing behind despondently. "So, Ginny. Looking forward to your first Christmas at Hogwarts?"

"Yes thanks, Deanna." Ginny's eyes did not leave the ground.

"You sound thrilled." Rianne drawled. "Doesn't she, DT?"

"No, Ri, she sounds depressed. For which I don't really blame her given current circumstances. There's normally a few more people around for a start." Deanna listened to the echoes of their voices as they headed back for the Serpents' Nest and shivered involuntarily. For all her bravado about the Heir of Slytherin, now the school was empty, Deanna was a lot more aware that there was in fact a rather dangerous monster lurking somewhere within the bowels of the school. Stop it, she told herself, glancing nervously into the shadows. You'll freak yourself out. How the hell is Ginny meant to cope if she sees you getting scared?

Unfortunately for her, Rianne had noticed.

"Not scared, are you Tyler?"

"Of course not. I just don't want to hang around in these freezing cold corridors, that's all. Come on, common room." Without giving Rianne a chance to expose her further, Deanna quickened her pace and led both girls swiftly back to the Nest.

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Several hours later, and the Hogwarts Express pulled in at King's Cross. Luella and Marlie unloaded their trunks with a little help from some Levitation Charms, and headed slowly back for the Muggle world.

"Your mum not here then?" Luella asked, casting her eyes around for a sign of Mrs. Lovegood.

Marlie shook her head. "No, she's got to work. Dad's picking me up. I think we're going to the Leaky Cauldron and getting the Floo home."

"Floo?" Luella raised an eyebrow. "How's your dad going to manage that? He's a Muggle."

"He's very broad-minded about these things. Anyway, all he has to do is chuck some powder into the fire, step in and tell it to take him home. He's done it before, he'll be quite alright." Marlie did not seem overly worried about things. "Where has my brother got to?"

"Over there, saying goodbye to Kat Stormosi." Luella pointed him out. Marlie rolled her eyes.

"Should have guessed. Honestly, brothers and their girlfriends. Be eternally thankful you're an only child, Lu. Hold on, I'm going over there. We'll be here all night if we're not careful." Marlie turned and stalked over to where Mike Lovegood and Kat Stormosi were holding hands and giggling. "Much as I hate to interrupt you two, can I have my brother back at some point? Only it's not that warm out here and I'd like to get home at some point."

"Yeah, yeah, in a minute." Mike told her, his attention clearly on other things. "So, Kat, I suppose I'll see you at the Christmas party then."

"Try and keep me away." she purred, loath to let go of him. "Owl me when you get back, won't you?"

"The very second, my dear." Mike promised, before giving her another kiss.

"Michael!" Marlie yelled, beginning to get impatient.

"Alright, alright." Mike muttered. "Anyway, I'd best be off before my little sis here starts throwing a tantrum. Be seein' ya, Kat."

"Bye, Mikey." Kat called, turning away with a wave.

Mike waved back, dragging behind a little as Marlie hauled him away.

"Come on, you. Honestly, you're only going to be apart for a few weeks and you'll be seeing her again at Christmas anyway."

"Ah, what's the matter, eh sis?" Mike teased her, ruffling her hair and causing Marlie to shriek at him. "Jealous because you're still single?"

"No!" snapped Marlie, desperately trying to sort her hair out and restore it to its usual immaculate state. "Just cold, that's all!" She took another look at her brother, now in Muggle clothes. "Aren't you?"

"No, not really. I'm hard, me."

He must be, thought Luella, given the absence of anything resembling warm winter clothes. Torn jeans, Iron Maiden t-shirt, rather scruffy looking leather jacket, a couple of piercings and not a lot else. Deanna would have approved, Luella thought. As did quite a few other passing Hogwarts girls, who were all giving Mike Lovegood the eye. Eye-catching as it might be however, it didn't look designed to keep the wearer very warm.

"Too thick to notice the cold, more like." Marlie muttered, shivering despite the layers of Muggle clothing she'd changed into. You had to give Marlie her due - although no one was more attentive to the nuances of fashion than her, she was also very fond of her creature comforts and positively the last person to be seen wandering around in winter in a short skirt and skimpy top.

"I heard that!" Mike snapped at his sister, leading to yet another round of bickering, which didn't conclude until the three of them had left the platform and emerged into Muggle London, where their parents were waiting.

By one of those strange twists of fate, it seemed that Mr. Lovegood and Mrs. Martin had already met and struck up a conversation. Luella couldn't help being struck by the contrast between her own always immaculately turned out mother and Marlie's father, looking just like his son, except the hair was greyer, and the clothes, consisting of rather faded jeans, an old flannel shirt, beige woollen pullover and a thick black winter jacket, couldn't have been more aimed at practicality if he'd tried.

"Hi, Dad!" Marlie ran up to her father and gave him a hug.

"Hello, sweetheart. Good to see you again!" He returned the hug before letting her go and turning to his son. "Evening, son."

"Evening, Dad." grinned Mike, shaking hands with his father.

Luella turned to her mother. "Hi Mum."

"Hello, darling. How was school?"

Luella exchanged looks with Marlie, who looked like she was trying not to laugh. The truth clearly was not an option. Guess what Mum, I'm the Heir of Morgan Slytherin really wouldn't go down too well.

"Not bad. Nothing interesting really happened. Marlie's doing really well at Quidditch though."

"Yeah, we beat Ravenclaw by miles!" Marlie enthused. "And next term, we're getting some top new brooms too!"

"You're going to win the Cup back for Slytherin then, are you? Please do, your mother's a lot nicer to be around when Slytherin are winning." said Mr. Lovegood.

"Quidditch, that's the school sport isn't it?" Mrs. Martin asked her daughter, trying to remember everything Luella had ever told her about it.

"Yeah." Luella nodded. "Marlie's on the reserve team. Mike's on the first team. The reserves are leading the championship at the moment."

"Unfortunately the same can't be said about the first team." Marlie grinned at her brother.

"Shut up." muttered Mike.

"Their new Seeker's rubbish." Marlie continued. "He got hired because his father's rich and bought the team new brooms. Sadly, his father can't buy him any talent."

"Talking of your cousin." Mr. Lovegood interrupted. "Are you inviting him over this year? Seeing as he spent half the summer here and all."

Luella raised an eyebrow. Draco Malfoy had been over at the Lovegoods? Very surprising, although it did go a long way towards explaining why he'd been observed on several occasions displaying rather more knowledge of Muggle pop culture than Luella had thought he had. It also went a long way towards explaining why Marlie was blushing and carefully avoiding Luella's eyes.

"Hope not." muttered Mike.

"Nah, he's staying at school. Not that I'd've invited him anyway." Marlie said, flinging her hair back in one disdainful move. "Not after he stabbed me in the back and stole my job."

"Shame." replied Mr. Lovegood, unbothered by his daughter's attitude. "I quite liked the boy. Seemed such a nice young man."

Draco Malfoy? Nice? Luella, dying to ask all sorts of questions, couldn't take her eyes off Marlie, who was squirming very uncomfortably.

"Anyway," Mr. Lovegood was continuing to Mrs. Martin, "I'd better get these two off home, keep them out of mischief. Nice to have met you, Celia. Now are you sure you

don't want to come over to ours on Christmas? There'll be plenty of food to go around."

"Awfully nice of you, Leonard, but we couldn't. We're calling on some neighbours of ours anyway, so we won't be able to go, but thank you for the invitation."

"Never mind. Another time, maybe." He turned to Luella. "You'll be going, won't you Luella?"

"Of course. Try stopping me." Luella grinned. The opportunity to distract Marlie and ask her more about this nice side of Draco Malfoy was irresistible. No, not for all the world would she be missing that party.

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The days passed quickly. In Surrey, Luella spent the days doing the last of her Christmas shopping, getting her holiday homework done, and spending an inordinate amount of time on the phone to Marlie, who having been landed with Rianne's Defence Against the Dark Arts homework in addition to her own, was busier than normal and required copious amounts of assistance from Luella, more than usual anyway.

Meanwhile at Hogwarts, Deanna and Rianne passed the days by educating Ginny in just about every aspect of life as a Slytherin, ranging from house history and famous Slytherins, to Slytherin House's present day incumbents, who they were and how to deal with them, and ending up with Slytherin philosophy and general discussions on what it meant to be Slytherin, lavishly interwoven with stories of their first three years at Hogwarts. In all of this, Ginny proved to be an avid pupil, listening fascinated as she sat curled up on a foot stool by the fire while the older Slytherins talked.

Surprisingly enough, Draco, Crabbe and Goyle gave them no problems. For the most part, they kept themselves to themselves, only occasionally throwing them the odd dark look or engaging in a verbal skirmish, which Deanna and Rianne generally had no problems dealing with. Stranger still, however, was Draco's behaviour when Crabbe and Goyle weren't around or were otherwise engaged. He would move that bit closer to where the girls were sitting, put some books in front of him to give the appearance of doing work, and sit and listen to them. On occasion, one of the older Slytherins would notice and challenge him, to which he'd respond with his usual sarcastic comments before retreating. Deanna and Rianne would then ignore him and return to their discussion. Ginny, however, intrigued by his behaviour, started observing Draco behind his back, and uncovered a few more anomalies. Not only was he listening in, his eyes also followed them whenever he thought Crabbe and Goyle weren't watching. His attention was particularly focused on Deanna for some reason. Now this in itself wasn't too shocking - after all, everyone knew that Draco Malfoy and Deanna Tyler were perennially at each other's throats. However, what was surprising was the way he looked at her. It wasn't with the malice, spite or hatred you would have come to expect, although it wasn't exactly friendly either. In fact, more than anything, Draco just looked confused. Confused, and a little wistful. Curious. Very curious. Almost as if he secretly wanted nothing more than to drop Crabbe and Goyle and join in with their conversations. Well, Ginny couldn't blame him, they

were interesting little chats. Certainly compared to Crabbe and Goyle's company, anyway.

And then Christmas Eve arrived. While Ginny normally slept in the first year dorm, Deanna and Rianne were adamant that she was not sleeping alone on Christmas Eve. So it was that she found herself dragged protesting into the fourth year dorm.

"Look, you really don't have to do this, I'll be quite alright on my own, you know!"

"Nonsense." Rianne told her as she and Deanna hauled her into their dorm. "There's two beds going spare in here, it's no trouble. I'm sure Marlie or Luella won't mind if you borrow one of theirs for the night. It's Christmas! And you're not spending it on your own. Come on!"

"Oh, alright then." Ginny gave in. While she was well aware of the fact that Deanna and Rianne were staying over purely because Marlie had asked them to, they were quite good company and they did have a point - Christmas morning wasn't much fun on your own.

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That night, Ginny dreamed. Dreamed she was walking through Hogwarts, alone. It was night time, and her footsteps resounded eerily off the walls. She didn't know exactly where she was going but what she did know was that she was afraid. Terrified of what she might find when she got there.

Her footsteps led her into the Great Hall. Once again it was set up as though for the Duelling Club, and once again, a fight was in progress. Deanna was there, duelling Lockhart again, and as she had done before, was easily beating him. They were being watched by Professor Snape, whose eyes followed Deanna with a rather unusual expression in them, one of longing, loss and a frightening hunger.

The fight went on for some time, but finally, Deanna had Lockhart disarmed and pinned down, ready to strike a final blow. At this point, Snape halted proceedings.

"Not bad, Miss Tyler." he told her. "Not bad at all. But can you beat this?" He waved his wand and cast the Serpensortia charm again. It hit Lockhart and with an explosion of green sparks, he changed into the snake that Harry had had to face. Deanna backed away, a look of fear on her face as she stumbled away.

"Look out!" cried Ginny. Too late. Deanna, in her fright, had forgotten that she was only a foot away from the edge of the stage and lost her footing. Falling to the floor with a thud, the hood on her cloak covering her face, Deanna shrieked and curled up, her wand flying out of her hand, leaving her vulnerable.

Ginny looked around for someone, anyone to help her as the snake raced nearer. But there was no one. Snape was nowhere to be seen. Ginny hid her eyes as the snake reared its head back to strike.

The door burst open. Ginny looked up and breathed a sigh of relief as Harry strode in.

"Leave her!" he shouted. The snake immediately backed down and curled up, pacified. He turned to the fallen girl. "Are you alright?"

She pulled back the hood and staggered to her feet. Ginny gasped to see that it was no longer Deanna but Luella. She was wearing a white sleeveless top which left her arms bare, and Ginny could just make out what looked like a tattoo on her right arm. A tattoo? Surely not? After all, Luella was only a kid and she came from a fairly conventional Muggle background, she couldn't possibly have a tattoo. Yet that was what it looked like, a tattoo with two snakes entwined around a central column. How bizarre.

Harry was even now helping Luella up, one arm round her shoulders.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Thank you!" she whispered, smiling in gratitude. Harry smiled back. And then it happened. The scar and glasses disappeared, the boy turned into a man and Harry Potter's face changed into that of someone else, a stranger to Luella but all too familiar to Ginny. It was the face of the voice in her diary, Tom Riddle.

"No problem, Luella." He was still smiling, but the evil in his eyes made a mockery of the good looking face that framed them. "After all, we can't have Morgan's Heir taken out by a tiny little snake like that, can we?"

Luella screamed and turned to run, but Tom was too quick for her. Grabbing her by the arm, he held the struggling girl captive before turning to a now terrified Ginny.

"Come on now, Ginny." The tone was gentle, but Ginny was not fooled. "Help me like you did before. Call the snake for me."

"No." Ginny whispered. "No! Not again, please!" She took a step backwards, uncomfortably aware that the room seemed to be shrinking, the walls closing in and the usual decorations vanishing as the Great Hall changed into a different room entirely, an underground chamber that Ginny had never seen before yet which seemed horribly familiar.

Tom was advancing on her, wand in one hand, a sobbing Luella in the other. "What's that? No? But Ginny, you've always been so willing before." The Malfoy-esque pout only served to heighten her fear. Backing away yet further, she found herself up against a pillar, with no way out. She should have been frightened. And yet, from somewhere deep within came a feeling of courage that she never even thought she'd possessed.

"Not any more. Not any more, do you hear me!" she yelled at him. "I'm not helping you any more! I'm not! I'm not! I'm not!" Her voice cracked as she kept on sobbing the words over and over again, sobbing helplessly, curling up in fear as those merciless eyes, now a horrifying shade of red, drew nearer and nearer, Tom Riddle's voice becoming colder and harsher as he kept on snarling at her to give in....

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"I'm not! I'm not! I'm not!" Ginny sobbed, struggling as someone grabbed her shoulder and shook it. "I'm not!"

"Not what?" a girl's voice asked her. "Gin, wake up!"

Now that didn't sound like Tom. She'd never imagined him as having a Welsh accent for a start. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

Rianne was sitting next to her on the bed, wand lit up and raised above her, a look of concern on her face.

"Ginny, are you alright?"

She nodded weakly. "I think so."

Rianne placed her wand on the bedside table. "You didn't sound it. What happened? Bad dream?"

Ginny nodded again, too drained to speak. The malice in Tom's eyes was still real enough that she couldn't stop shaking.

The older Slytherin seemed to understand as she put her arms round the trembling first year.

"Trust me, I know all about them kid. Deanna has them quite a bit, although don't tell her I said that." She held Ginny close, stroking her hair in a way that brought tears to Ginny's eyes for a quite different reason, reminding her as it did of the way her mother had held her as a child. "What was it about, your family?"

Ginny seized at the straw held out to her. "Yes." she whispered. Rianne gripped her that bit tighter.

"They'll accept it one day, Gin." Rianne soothed her. "Trust me. They're your family. They do love you, you know."

"Ron doesn't." Ginny whispered.

"He does." Rianne told her. "He just doesn't realise it at the moment. But he will. He will. Don't ask me how I know, but he will."

"He won't." Ginny wept. "He won't. He holds grudges worse than Snape does."

"I doubt that." Rianne laughed. "Gin, he's a Gryffindor. It's not in their nature to hold grudges for long. They'll come round. You'll see."

Ginny nodded as Rianne let her go and produced a tissue, wiping her eyes with it.
"Will you be OK now?"

"I think so." whispered Ginny.

"Good." said Rianne, a flicker of relief in her eyes. "You get some sleep, and if you have any more bad dreams, let me know, I'll go to Professor Snape and get some Sleeping Potion for you."

"OK." Ginny murmured as Rianne tucked her back in. "Thanks, Rianne."

"No problem, Gin." Rianne replied as she drew the curtain.

Ginny settled back in her bed, her worried mind not eased by Rianne's assurances. After all, it wasn't her family that she was upset about, was it? No way could she tell Rianne what was really on her mind. Because that particular nightmare had dislodged a few memories, hadn't it? It wasn't the first time she'd had it either, it had recurred a few times since the Duelling Club. But it was the first time she'd really remembered it.

It was also the first time that she remembered what had actually happened during her blackouts. Not completely. But there were fragments coming back to her. Memories of reaching for her diary, driven by a voice in her head, of opening it and this thing taking control of her. Of slipping unnoticed through the school, using secret passages she hadn't even known existed, that maybe not even Filch or her brothers knew about. Of standing in front of a mirror and speaking in a strange language that would have terrified her parents had they heard it. And of standing back and watching as this... thing... had emerged from a newly revealed passage way. She'd led it through the school, the monster using the water pipes to travel without being seen, and waited for a suitable target to present itself. And then...

She shut her eyes tight, not wanting to think about it. Thinking that she might be causing the attacks had been bad enough. Knowing it was far worse. And yet... it hadn't really been her, had it? She remembered Tom's eyes in the dream and shuddered. Her instincts had been right. He most certainly hadn't had her best interests at heart when advising her. The manipulative little...! Fear subsided as anger began to rise. He'd used her! Damn him. Damn him! Well, not any more! she thought, eyes burning fiercely. Her thoughts raced back to the diary, currently under the pillow in her own bed. Maybe that was why she'd remembered this time - the diary was too far away to affect her. Didn't matter now. There and then, she decided that she wasn't going to let it affect her again. She wasn't going to write in it anymore, she wasn't even going to look at it anymore. As of tomorrow, that book was going straight in her trunk.

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Ginny did eventually manage to get back to sleep, and she was not troubled by any more nightmares. In fact, the next thing she knew was being abruptly woken by the full weight of an overexcited fourteen year old.

"Wake up Ginny!" she could hear Deanna yelling, her lips about five inches from Ginny's ear. "It's CHRISTMAS!!!!"

"It is?" Ginny asked faintly.

"Course it is. What, did the non-stop playing of Slade and all the decorations in the common room not give it away then?"

"I'd forgotten." True enough, what with all the dreams, she'd quite forgotten that it had been Christmas Eve.

"Forgotten?" Deanna stared at her in amazement. "How can you forget Christmas?" She turned away before Ginny could reply. "Never mind. Let's get Stormosi out of bed." Sliding off Ginny, she skipped over to Rianne's bed, flung back the curtains and dived in, yelling "MERRY CHRISTMAS!!" in much the same manner that she had to Ginny.

Rianne's reply was unintelligible, but the last two words sounded suspiciously like "off, Tyler!"

Deanna did not seem bothered. "Ah, come on, where's your Christmas spirit?"

"Sent it home as a present for my dad. Tyler, get off me."

Deanna backed off, letting Rianne sit up. She rubbed her eyes, blinked and looked around her, before spotting the huge pile of presents at the foot of her bed. The cynicism vanished immediately.

"Hey, presents!"

"See, even Stormer has an inner child somewhere." Deanna commented as she returned to her own bed. "Come on then, you lot. Open your stuff, let's see what everyone's got us this year."

The present-opening took some time. To her surprise, Ginny's presents had been brought in too. And even more surprising, some of them were actually from her family. A subscription to *Teen Witch* magazine from her parents, a gorgeous ebony cat statuette from Bill, a delicately crafted silver dragon brooch from Charlie, and a book of poetry from Percy, inscribed with a greeting that sounded just a touch more formal than it really needed to be, even by his standards. There was also a present from Fred and George, of which the mere reading out of the gift tag caused Deanna and Rianne to dive behind their beds.

"What's with you two?" Ginny asked in bewilderment. "It's a Christmas present from my brothers, not a time bomb or something."

"I wouldn't put it past them." Deanna called out.

"Yeah, where your brothers are concerned, we're taking no chances." Rianne added.

Ginny shook her head in disbelief as she tore off the wrapping paper to reveal a small treasure chest. "Honestly, you two. You don't trust anyone, do you? Can't believe your cynicism sometimes. I'm their little sister, they wouldn't play a joke on me." She unfastened the catch and lifted the lid. "You two are so - aaaaggghh!!!" Ginny

shrieked as a giant cobra burst out of the chest and lunged towards her. Instinctively, she pushed the whole thing away.

Deanna and Rianne emerged to see what the fuss was about and burst out laughing. Ginny was sitting back, pale and trembling, staring at a wooden chest with a stuffed snake on a spring hanging out of it.

"A snake-in-the-box! Classic!" laughed Deanna.

"Oh, very Fred and George." remarked Rianne. "I remember Lucas getting one of them a few years ago. Kept using it to terrify Lydia with. I think his mum took it off him in the end after she started having nightmares - she was only little. Hope you're made of sterner stuff, Gin."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll be fine." said Ginny vaguely, trying not to think of an image from the recently unlocked memories involving another rather similar snake. "Bloody Fred and George, I'll kill them for scaring me like that." She noticed an envelope tucked inside the box and opened it. No unpleasant surprises this time, just a perfectly normal card with a message, which Ginny read out loud.

"Dear sis, Merry Christmas and stuff. What with you being a Slyth and all, we thought this was rather appropriate. Hope you like it, and that you and the rest of those wild and crazy guys in Slytherin have hours of fun with it. In particular, we believe that a lot of amusement could be derived from introducing Mr. Draco Malfoy and Miss Marlie Lovegood to it, however we'll leave the fine details to you, devious plotter that you must surely be by now (and if you're not, why not??). Anyway, have a truly brilliant day! We'll be thinking of you. Lots of love, your ever loving (no, really!) big brothers, Fred and George." Ginny laid the card down, suddenly overcome by a wave of happiness. "Oh, wow! They still like me!"

"Told you." grinned Rianne. "They're Gryffindors, they don't hold grudges for long."

"I know, I know, but..." Ginny struggled to find the words to express her feelings. "It's like, the rest of my family, Mum, Dad, Bill, Charlie, they're all being really nice about me being here but you can tell they're disappointed. While Percy's being perfectly polite and all, but you can tell he disapproves. And as for Ron, well." She gave a dismissive shrug. Deanna and Rianne knew what she meant. Ron's opinion of his sister's house was known to pretty much everyone. "But Fred and George, on the other hand... They got me this present precisely because I'm a Slytherin! It's like they're the only ones not afraid to mention it. They know I'm a Slytherin, and they don't mind! In fact, they actually seem to like the idea! They called us all wild and crazy guys!" Ginny sighed, a blissed out look of euphoria settling on her face. "Wild and crazy, wow!" she whispered dreamily. "Only people they really like get called that!"

"Good old Fred and George." Deanna remarked, giving Rianne a wry grin. "Trust them to come through for us."

"Yeah." smiled Rianne, relieved that Ginny's depression appeared to have finally lifted. "I will say this for them - they do have an unerring sense of what to do in these

situations. Good on them, Ginny's been miserable all holidays. Now look at her. She's her old self again. That perky little kid we first met on the train."

Deanna's smile disappeared. "Bloody Fred and George. Trust them to completely ruin my day. And they even manage to do it by proxy too! Honestly, anyone would think they were Slytherins or something."

"Killjoy. Anyway, you were the one waking us all up screaming 'It's Christmas!'"

"That's different." Deanna squirmed. Changing the subject, she turned back to Ginny. "What else have you got?"

Ginny was opening the last of her presents. "Cool! It's a CD Walkmage! From Marlie! Oh wow, Lydia and Autumn are going to be sick with envy when they see this - Lydia's still trying to save a deposit for one. These things cost at least fourteen Galleons normally!"

"She only charges that much because she can." Rianne pointed out. "Bet they don't cost her fourteen Galleons to make. In fact, I bet they don't cost her four to make."

"Cynic." Deanna laughed. "Impressed, Gin?"

"You bet!" Ginny nodded, eyes shining. However, the light did not stay in them long. "But I don't have any CDs to play on it."

"We thought as much." grinned Rianne. "Which is why me and Tyler got you a little something too. Tyler?"

Deanna went through her trunk and emerged with three small-ish square packages. "Here you go, Gin. One from the two of us, and one from Lu too. Hope you like them, we only had Marlie's word to go on with regards to your tastes."

Ginny ripped them open to reveal three CDs. "Cool! Madonna, Take That and Now 23! Ace! Ohhh, thank you! You guys rule!"

"No problem, Ginny." Rianne said, casual as ever. "Just that we could hardly have you as our honoured guest over Christmas and not get you anything, could we? It wasn't any trouble, really."

"It bloody was." muttered Deanna. "Honestly, going into that record store and having to buy a Take That record. Most embarrassing experience of my life. Did you know the guy behind the counter actually thought it was for me?"

"Deanna. Shut up." Rianne told her. "Got anything else, Ginny?"

Ginny searched around for more presents, but there were none. "No." The vitality oozed away and dejection returned. "Nothing from Ron."

"The git!" Deanna seemed, if anything, more offended than Ginny. "How dare he not get his own sister a Christmas present!"

"That's pretty low." remarked Rianne. "Anyone would think *he's* a Slytherin the way he's been acting."

"He is not acting like a Slytherin." snapped Deanna. "He is acting like a complete child. And next time I see him, I shall tell him so."

"No, it's alright." said Ginny, more sad than angry, and certainly not surprised. "I hadn't really expected him to get me anything. No need to shout at him or anything. Thanks though."

"You're taking this awfully well, Gin." said Rianne. "If it were me, I'd be far less happy about it."

"What, would you throw a tantrum or something?" asked Ginny, curious. Now that would be something to see. Rianne hardly ever displayed any form of strong emotion. Shouting and screaming were things other people did.

"Don't be silly, Ginny. Of course I wouldn't throw a tantrum." A smile of purest evil crept across Rianne's features. "I would maintain a calm and composed exterior then start composing a diabolical scheme to destroy everything of worth and value in their life."

"Speaking of which, what did you get us, Ginny?" Deanna interrupted, with a wicked gleam in her eyes.

Ginny's composure disintegrated. "Oh! I didn't think... I mean, I didn't know you two were going to... And I didn't know you that well... Erm..." Inspiration dawned. "Would you like a snake-in-the-box?" she asked hopefully.

Deanna burst out laughing, and even Rianne couldn't help smiling. "Nice recovery." she drawled. "But don't worry. We weren't expecting anything. Keep your snake. Bring it to Christmas dinner with you. Malfoy hasn't seen it yet, has he?"

"No. He hasn't." Deanna said thoughtfully. "Yes, definitely bring it to dinner. But keep it in its box. After all, a thing is far more interesting if kept hidden. I think we could have some fun with this. But enough of this kidding around. I'd better get dressed, I suppose." Deanna slipped out of bed, picked up her clothes and made for the door, presumably to have a shower.

"Why, you going somewhere?" Rianne asked in surprise. It was still relatively early, and Deanna was not one to break with the usual tradition of slobbing out in her pyjamas until noon without a good reason.

"Not really. I'm just nipping out for a bit. I won't be long. There's just someone I need to see."

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In contrast to the fun in the Slytherin dorm, Professor Severus Snape was spending Christmas on his own, watching Corvus trying to get inside a jar of freshly pickled newts' legs.

"I'd give up if I were you." he advised the bird. "They're loaded with security charms and the lids are made of the best clay around. You wouldn't like them anyway."

Corvus gave up his quest and flew back to perch on Severus's shoulder, cawing softly in his ear in an attempt to get round him.

"Cut it out, you." Severus told him. "I've already fed you this morning anyway. You want something else, you go out and hunt it down yourself. No, don't look at me like that. I am not giving in. Look, stop it. No, I don't care if it is Christmas. You are not eating my best Potions ingredients - hello?" He looked up. Someone was knocking on the door. Now that was unusual. He wasn't expecting any of his colleagues to visit, and besides, that didn't sound like a teacher. Far too timid and self-conscious. No, that was a student. So, a Slytherin then. Which one, however, was still a mystery, although Severus suspected that it wasn't one of the boys. Crabbe and Goyle never came to visit him independently, and Malfoy rarely bothered with common courtesies like knocking. Nor, he thought, was it likely to be Rianne Stormosi - the odd mix of self-assurance and deference he'd come to associate with her was missing here. Which just left Ginny and Deanna. And Ginny was hardly likely to come visiting on her own...

"Come in, Miss Tyler." he said, fighting the idiotic grin that was struggling to emerge. The door opened and to his delight, his guess was proved right. Deanna Tyler entered, in awe.

"How did you know it was me?" she asked, amazement turning to annoyance at having been seen through so quickly.

"I have my methods." Severus responded, preserving an aura of mystery that most wise Slytherins develop sooner rather than later. Rule Two of being a successful Slytherin - never reveal one's secrets, and certainly never give a mundane explanation when a magical one could be hinted at. Lifting his wand, he lit the fire. While the chill in the air was something he was by now quite used to, he didn't want Deanna to be uncomfortable. "So, what brings you here? Do you not have presents to unwrap? I know your mother's not the most organised of people but surely not even she could forget Christmas?"

"No, of course not!" Deanna giggled as she slid into a chair, Corvus flying in to land on her shoulder, greeting her affectionately. Deanna didn't know how privileged she was, Severus thought. Corvus was normally extremely distrustful of visitors - indeed, there were only four people other than himself who the raven ever bothered showing any affection to: Caitlin, Deanna, Luella and oddly enough, Draco Malfoy, a not infrequent visitor to Severus's dungeon quarters.

Deanna, unaware of all this, was regaling him with a description of all her new presents. "Mum got me a couple of CDs, although her main present is being sent on separately what with it being huge and all. Lu managed to chase down tickets for

Metallica this summer, don't ask me how, and even more amazingly, she says she'll actually go with me!"

"How kind of her." A pause. "And what might Metallica be?"

"They're a Muggle rock band, sir." Despite the term of respect, Severus found himself for the first time in his life being made to feel inferior by someone younger than him. All of a sudden, he was fully aware that he was thirty eight years old, not getting any younger, and that there was a whole other world out there known as Planet Youth Culture which he knew nothing whatsoever about and probably never would, and what was more, that however much he did manage to glean about it, Deanna Tyler would always know more about it than him. His mood was not helped by the patronising look on Deanna's face which had all the arrogant pity of the kind of look one gave to an elderly relative who was no longer quite in possession of all their faculties. Any minute now he expected her to raise her voice and start saying things like "Are you alright, dear? Had your pills?" before turning away to a non-existent companion to comment about him as if he wasn't there "Got to keep checking up on him - dear old Uncle Sev does have a tendency to forget these things." No, definitely time to change the subject.

"Quite. And what else did your friends see fit to bestow on you this year?"

"Well, Auntie Mel got me some Bond movies on video - reckons they make great Auror training material apparently, especially for the modules on Understanding the Psychology of the Enemy and What Not To Do or How To Apprehend Dark Mages Without Getting Killed."

"She's mentioned them once or twice." Severus mused. "What else?"

"Rianne's got me some very cool goth jewellery, look!" She pulled back the sleeves of her robes to reveal an array of silver and black rings with various motifs all centring around the theme of death in some way, and more wristbands than he'd ever seen on one person before, most of which seemed to have studs on them. Once again, Severus was made painfully aware of the fact that his youth was receding dimly into the past. His only consolation was that as yet, his hairline had yet to do the same.

"Very fetching. Latest fashion, is it?"

"Hardly." Deanna rolled her eyes. "The day Marlie starts wearing this stuff is the day I lose my faith in life, and the day Pansy Parkinson starts is the day I lose the will to live."

"Nevertheless, it does suit you." It was true. Bizarre as it was even by magical standards, it looked good on Deanna. Her naturally pale skin went well with all the black, and it wasn't like she'd ever been the ultra-feminine type. Besides, he rather liked the idea of her having a unique fashion sense. Made her more... special.

"You think so?" Deanna looked sceptical, but pleased all the same.

"I do. I may not be a dedicated follower of fashion, but I do know what looks good. Commend Miss Stormosi on her taste. However, I must inform you now that if you wear them in my lessons, they'll be confiscated. Rings and volatile potions do not mix."

"Will do." Deanna promised. "Then there's Marlie's present. And you'll never believe what she got me."

"Another converted Muggle gadget?"

"No! Not even close! Nothing electrical at all. This present's alive."

Severus couldn't even begin to imagine. "She's not diversified into artificial intelligence, has she?"

"Not yet, not as far as I know. No, she has got me..." Deanna paused for effect. "A Venus Fly-Trap!"

Severus recalled his Herbology NEWT. "Ah yes, the Venus Fly-Trap. Smaller, Muggle-safe version of the Neptunian Sheep-Catcher, a giant carnivorous plant created by an eccentric American Herbologist called Polonius Strange which is found only in a few private collections and the major herbological research institutes and is believed to have inspired the design for the Muggle bear trap. And Miss Lovegood has bought you one."

"Yeah." Deanna grinned. "Rianne and Ginny were feeding beetles to it as I left. Ginny's decided to call it Neville."

"Neville?"

"Yeah, after Longbottom. We think it's meant to be ironic." Deanna paused, doubts creeping in. "We hope it's meant to be ironic, anyway."

"Dumbed down, sanitised and completely harmless version of something that was always meant to be frightening? Yes, I can quite see how that could fit." To this day, Severus had never been able to grasp quite how two talented mages like Frank and Amelia Longbottom could have produced an almost-Squib like Neville. Frank Longbottom had been two years older than Severus, in the same year as Narcissa Harker and Lucius Malfoy, but never their friend. Severus remembered him fondly, as someone who'd always intervened the minute trouble had started and done a lot to protect him and his yearmates from both older Slytherins and from each other. Yes, Frank Longbottom had been easily one of the most popular and respected Slytherins around, so much so that even his marriage to a Hufflepuff had raised not a comment from anyone. Which went a long way towards explaining why the mere sight of Neville Longbottom brought out the worst in him now. Severus often wondered what Frank would think of his son if he were still capable of comprehending the concept. A boy with all the magical ability of a Canadian Tree Slug and, adding insult to injury, a Gryffindor too. Such a disappointment. At least he wasn't a Slytherin. Although maybe he would have fared better there - sharing a dorm with Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle would have toughened him up like nothing else.

Enough nostalgia. After all, it wasn't Frank Longbottom's child that concerned him now. He returned his attention to his own.

"So you've now got Neville the Venus Fly-Trap adorning the common room, have you? That'll go well with that cactus of Miss Lovegood's. Is it going to stop there or are you going to acquire a whole greenhouseful of exotic plants named after the denizens of Gryffindor House?"

"Hey, that's an idea!" Deanna seemed quite taken with the concept. "Wonder what sort of plant Ron'd be? Not to mention Harry. I'll give that one to Lu, bet she'd love to have Harry Potter by her bed every night."

Stranded on the other side of the generation gap as he was, Severus had been around teenagers for long enough not to have any trouble deciphering that remark.

"She is not interested in Harry Potter." It was more of a command than a statement. "Who can tell?" Deanna shrugged dramatically. "She doesn't seem to be interested in boys full stop at the moment, and Harry's a bit young for her after all. She's quite fond of him though. Maybe when they're both a little older, eh?" She gave him a conspiratorial wink.

"If you say so, Miss Tyler." Severus's tones indicated that that particular thread of conversation was at an end. Permanently. "So what did you come to see me for, anyway? Is there some kind of problem?"

"Oh no." Deanna reached for her bag, rather glad to change the subject. Silently, she reprimanded herself for being such a fool as to mention Harry Potter. The whole school knew Snape hated him after all. Of course he wouldn't want any of his Slytherins going out with him. Best not to repeat any Potter-related rumours in his hearing. Probably a very good thing that most of the attraction seemed to be on Harry's side - Luella seemed to have a very laissez-faire attitude to romance of any description. However, that wasn't what she was here for, was it?

"Seeing as you got me such a cool present last year - Nestra's keeping well, by the way - I thought I'd return the favour. Here you go." She presented him with a small black box.

Severus took it from her cautiously, hardly daring to believe his eyes. Deanna Tyler, caring enough to get him a Christmas present? A wonder indeed.

He flipped open the box. There, glimmering in the fire-light, was a silver and jet pendant in the shape of a raven with its wings outstretched, strung onto a silver chain. He held it up, watching it gleam, iridescent as the flames illuminated the flawless black surface, marvelling at the craftsmanship involved and the sheer perfection of it.

"Well? Do you like it?" Deanna asked breathlessly, gripped by a sudden fear that he'd hate it, that he'd fling it back in her face and laugh, or worse, hand it gently back while explaining that he couldn't accept gifts from students, crushing her nascent fantasies of being special to him, of being more than just another student in his eyes.

He didn't answer immediately, still staring at it in silent awe as it turned this way and that.

"It's beautiful." he whispered, unable to take his eyes off it. Finally, he tore his gaze away and replaced it in its box. "Deanna, this must have cost you a fortune." Adoration had shifted into emotions that were far less pleasant.

"Well, not really, sir. I mean, I'd got quite a bit saved up. And Mum's always been quite generous with pocket money." There was also the fact that the Snape Sweepstake had proved to be a most profitable venture indeed, but Deanna decided not to mention that.

"Be that as it may, I don't know if I can accept this. It's far too valuable - people will think you're trying to bribe me." A pause and a searching stare. "You're not, are you?"

"No of course not, sir." Deanna felt her heart sink. She was just another student to him after all. All those times she thought she'd seen him watching her with a smile, all those times he'd advised her, comforted her, been proud of her, they meant nothing. She was just another Slytherin, just another part of his job.

He was still gazing at the raven necklace as if in a trance. "But it is very beautiful." Tearing his eyes away, Severus came face to face with Corvus, who was looking at him in a silent reproach that said more than words ever could.

"Don't look at me like that!" he snapped at the bird. *"I can't take gifts off students, you know that!"*

"What was that, sir?" Deanna asked, confused. Of course - she couldn't understand the language of birds, could she?

"Not you. Him." He indicated the raven, whose expression had not changed in the slightest. *"Corvus, will you stop that right now!"*

"Dear oh dear, Severus." the bird chanted. *"So cruel and to your own fledgling too. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."*

Severus gritted his teeth. *"It's the right thing to do. She doesn't know I'm her father, I can't be seen to be favouring her!"*

"That's never stopped you before!" Corvus returned.

"You're talking to your raven!" said Deanna, enthralled. "What are you saying?"

"Doesn't matter." snapped Severus, irritation making him brusque. *"Corvus, I'm warning you..."*

"Look at her." the raven continued. *"See how miserable you've made her. See how upset she is. You could change that, you know. One word from you could make her day."*

"*Corvus, shut up!*" hissed Severus. The bird was not to be put off.

"And on Christmas Day, too. You've really ruined her Christmas now, you realise that? Everyone else celebrating and she'll be sat there with that necklace in her hands all depressed, just because you were too high and mighty to accept a tiny little token of appreciation off her."

Severus gave in. Corvus was obviously not going to let the matter drop, and the last thing he needed was him flying after him all day, constantly reminding him of how miserable Deanna now was because of him. Christmas was enough torture as it was without that. Besides, despite all his principles, there was nothing he wanted more than to see Deanna happy.

He retrieved the necklace from its box and tapped it with his wand. It flew into the air, settled around his neck and fastened itself shut. "I think I shall keep it after all. It would be churlish of me to refuse such a well-meant gift. Thank you."

He watched as Deanna blinked in surprise, transformed from awkward teenager into a beauty of the future by that smile Severus lived for.

"Really? You like it? I mean, you're going to keep it? Oh, thank you!"

Dazzling. Simply dazzling, Severus thought, idly fingering the chain. Caitlin, for bringing such a wonderful young lady into this world, I will never cease to thank you.

"Well, I don't get given things like this every day. I don't think it will be a problem, as long as we keep it quiet that it was from you. I won't wear it too openly, but we'll both know it's there and that's the main thing. You have excellent taste, Deanna."

Deanna blushed, staring at her feet in a most uncharacteristic manner. "Well, I knew you liked ravens and all."

"Sometimes." said Severus, shooting a venomous glance at Corvus, who was now doing his best to look as smug as someone without the ability to grin could. "*Happy now, trouble?*"

"Perfectly, Severus." Corvus replied, sounding rather too innocent for his own good. *"And so is she, by the look of things. Well done, I knew you'd see sense in the end."*

"Oh, shut up." Severus told him. He returned his attention to Deanna. "Just one thing. Why did you get this for me? I'm only your teacher after all, not that I'm not pleased or anything."

Deanna paused, seeming a little nervous. However, gathering her courage, she decided to tell him.

"Just that you've always been there for me ever since I started here, whenever I've needed you, whenever I've been upset. And for most of that time, I've repaid you by criticising your subject, deliberately putting it at the bottom of my list of priorities, badmouthing you to my friends and generally taking you for granted. Anyway, I did

some thinking over the summer and realised that it was about time I showed some gratitude. So I've been working hard at your lessons, stopped talking about you behind your back, made an effort to be nice to your face and generally been behaving myself. And when I saw that in Hogsmeade, I just had to get it. Besides," and here Deanna's nervousness really became apparent, "you always seem so lonely and miserable at this time of year. I thought you could do with cheering up."

"Well, it worked." said Severus, too pleased that he'd won her over to care that she'd seen through his facade. "I'm very pleased with it, thank you! I'm also pleased you're finally doing yourself justice in Potions - you have no idea how painful it was to see an obviously bright girl like you getting such mediocre grades. But don't excel for my sake. Do it for yourself. Succeed on your own terms, not for anyone else."

"Always the teacher, aren't you?" Deanna remarked. "I thought you'd just be relieved I was finally doing well."

"See it as a tribute to your sparkling personality that I'm able to put aside my usual cynicism when dealing with you." Severus replied. "Besides," and here his mood turned sombre, "you might not always think as highly of me as you do now. I wouldn't want your studies to suffer just because your sense of gratitude has worn off." Or for any other reason, Severus thought, trying not to picture the one thing that would turn Deanna against him like nothing else.

"I wouldn't worry about it, sir." Deanna said airily, blissfully unaware of Severus's thoughts. "Once I've decided I like someone, they'd have to do something pretty bad to get me to hate them. Something very bad indeed."

Severus could only smile weakly. Smile, and pray wholeheartedly that Deanna never found out exactly what he'd done that been so very, very bad.

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A few hours later, and Christmas dinner was underway. Fred and George had raced over to give their sister a hug the minute she'd walked in, heaping copious greetings on her before offering to shake her hand.

Ginny reached out to take the hand of her nearest brother, Fred. At least, she did until Rianne stopped her.

"Don't even think about it, Ginny."

"Why not?" Ginny asked in surprise. "They're my own brothers."

"Exactly." said Rianne, ever wary. "Who knows what they could be up to?"

"Yeah, Gin, those two are the original pranksters and no mistake." Deanna put in. "Do not trust them, especially and I do mean ESPECIALLY when they're smiling like that. It usually means trouble."

Fred and George both pulled their sympathy-seeking looks. "They don't trust us."

"No, Fred, they don't. Not even our darling little sister."

Ginny bit her lip, eyes darting from the two Slytherins to her brothers, clearly having no idea what to do or who to believe. Rianne, seeing that Ginny was wavering, decided to step in.

"Don't listen to them, Ginny. They're trying to manipulate your good nature."

"They're better at it than us sometimes." Deanna piped up. "Anyone would think they were the Slytherins."

"Gods forbid!" laughed Fred. "But come on, Ginny, surely just one handshake for your big brothers, eh?" He held out his hand once more, a smile of purest innocence on his face.

Ginny looked around and decided to take the plunge. After all, they were her brothers and despite what Deanna and Rianne might say, she was sure they wouldn't hurt her. She shook his hand. And screamed.

She let go at once. "Fred Weasley, you little git, what did you just do?" she yelled at him, clutching her hand. "I'll tell Mum!"

The twins were falling about laughing. Fred held up a small grey object that looked a bit like a pebble.

"It's an electric buzzer! Delivers a mild magical charge whenever you shake hands with someone. It's a brilliant toy, Ron's fallen for it three times already this morning. Courtesy of Marlie Lovegood."

"There's a surprise." Rianne commented.

"So she's talking to you again, is she?" The last thing Deanna had heard, Marlie had been refusing to even acknowledge the twins' existence.

"Yeah." grinned Fred. "Saw us buying Ginny's present on the last Hogsmeade weekend of term, asked who it was for, and forgave us immediately when we told her."

"Immediately?" George raised an eyebrow. "I seem to remember her being all sarcastic and smug at us, extracting loads of apologies and an admission that we'd been in the wrong the whole time and Slytherins weren't so bad after all. Then her deigning to forgive us finally after we'd finished humiliating ourselves in front of the whole of Zonko's. Including that bloody Lucas Vettinari and his mates."

"Hey!" snapped Rianne. "You leave Lucas alone."

"Rianne fancies him." Deanna explained.

"Deanna, shut up."

The twins had been about to embark on a major teasing spree but the look on Rianne's face stopped them. That look could shatter stained glass windows. In another country. No one argued with Rianne when she had that look on her face.

"So, Ginny." said George, changing the subject. "Did you like your present?"

Ginny nodded. "Brilliant!"

"Knew you'd like it." grinned Fred. "We thought it was appropriate. It's a King Cobra, don't you know."

"Funnily enough," said Deanna, a mischievous gleam in her eyes, "that was what me and Rianne said when she first opened it. Well, to put it more precisely, our exact words were 'Jesus Christ, it's a ***king cobra', but it's close enough."

The twins burst out laughing, and even Rianne couldn't help grinning, although it was quickly suppressed.

"Tyler, I hope you've not been teaching our baby sister foul language." said Fred, trying to look disapproving, without success.

"Course not." laughed Deanna. "Although we've learnt quite a few new words off her, it's been quite surprising."

Ginny blushed furiously at this, the colour clashing violently with her hair. "Stop it!" she squeaked, outraged. Deanna laughed.

"See, she's telling me off already! Well done, Gin, you just passed your first test. Come on, let's go have dinner. See you boys around!"

The twins departed to try their new buzzer toy on yet another unsuspecting victim. Far away on the other side of the Great Hall, voices drifted across from the Gryffindor table.

"Go on, Ron, shake hands!"

"No way! I'm not falling for that again!"

"Oh look, Ron, we're sorry. Really!"

"Oh really. Sorry, but I still don't trust you two."

"Look, we're sorry, we really are. We won't do it again."

"Hmm. Promise?"

"We swear to every god there is. Promise!"

"Well... alright then."

"Brilliant! Thanks, Ron! Shake on it?"

"Oh go on then." A pause. Then...

"AAAAGGHHHH!!!! YOU GITS!!! YOU PROMISED!!!"

"YES!!! Four times in one morning! Result!"

The three Slytherins shook their heads, grinning. It had always been like that in the Weasley household. Ron's gullibility when faced with his brothers' pranks was legendary even among Slytherins, and was the primary reason why Draco liked teasing him.

Christmas dinner passed without event. Ginny's snake-in-the-box attracted plenty of inquisitive looks, but other than that, nothing out of the ordinary really happened. At the end of the main course, Draco, curiosity finally getting the better of him, made his way over to where Deanna was sitting.

"So, Tyler. What's in the box?" There was, after all, nothing on the outside to indicate what the contents were.

"That's for me to know and you not to." Deanna snapped back.

"Now, now, Tyler. That's not very Christmassy is it? Christmas, after all, is a time for giving and sharing. And I think you should give me that box." He reached out to open the catch.

Rianne, however, was quicker. One charm later and Draco was leaping back, clutching his hand in pain.

"Leave it, Malfoy. It's not yours. It's Ginny's. A present from her brothers." A twinkle came into Rianne's eyes, the kind of devilish twinkle that meant she was up to something. "A very valuable present from her brothers. One that she'd hate anyone else to mess around with or touch. Means a lot to her, you know."

Ginny might not have been a Slytherin that long, but the mentoring she'd received from Deanna and Rianne had not been lost on her.

"They saved up for months to buy me that." she lisped, peeking up at Draco through her eyelashes, putting on her best little-girl-lost look. "It's my favourite present too. I don't know what I'd do if it got broken or pinched. They'd never forgive me."

"Too bad." laughed Draco as he reached out for it again. Or tried to. Deanna had one hand clamped over his wrist before he could do anything.

"Malfoy. Tamper with that present and you will be very, very sorry."

"Alright, alright." Draco snarled. "Keep the bloody thing. Probably worthless anyway." He withdrew, resentful but at the same time full aware that it wouldn't be a good idea to try anything right now, not with both Deanna and Rianne ready to act,

not to mention a table full of teachers not far away. Later though... He slunk off, the germs of a plan coming together.

"Nice one, you two." murmured Deanna, watching him go. "You've just changed mere curiosity into obsession. He'll do anything to get at that box now, just you watch."

"He's so easy to manipulate sometimes." Rianne mused. "You wouldn't guess he's a Slytherin."

"You would." said Ginny, with a firmness that surprised both her companions.

"Been watching him, have you?" laughed Deanna.

"He's a Malfoy." Ginny replied. "Dad reckons they're all conniving manipulative scumbags, although not in those words."

"Smart man, Arthur Weasley." remarked Rianne. "Very smart man indeed."

Dessert came to an end, and the Great Hall began to empty as people slowly began the arduous task to dragging themselves back to their common rooms after stuffing themselves full of the delicious fare that made up Hogwarts Christmas Dinner.

"Now what?" Ginny whispered, shooting surreptitious glances in the direction of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle.

Rianne and Deanna leaned in that bit closer to do some serious plotting.

"Malfoy won't attack you with the two of us here, that's for certain." murmured Deanna.

"So it's probably best if you leave on your own *avec* box and wait for him to follow you. We'll track him after he leaves and intervene in case of any reprisals. Plus we want to watch."

With that agreed, all three of them leant back. Ginny picked up her box and announced in a loud voice that she sure was worn out, not to mention full.

"All the more for us then, our kid." Deanna replied, equally loudly, eyeing up the remains of a chocolate gateau.

"Yeah, I love this Hogwarts food. Could stay here for hours. Go on then, Ginny, off you go. We'll catch up with you later." Rianne told her.

"OK then. See you guys." said Ginny in a voice she hoped wasn't too fake and headed out.

Draco noticed immediately and began nudging Crabbe. "Look, you two! She's on her own! Now's our chance to find out what's so precious about that box of hers!"

"Do we have to?" whined Goyle.

"Yeah, we're not really that bothered about it, Malfoy." grunted Crabbe as he helped himself to some more plum pudding.

"Do you mean to tell me you're more interested in stuffing your faces full of treacle tart and plum pudding than tormenting Weasley?" demanded Draco in fury.

"Erm... well... if you put it like that... yeah." Goyle admitted.

"What's the matter, Malfoy?" asked Crabbe, a dangerous glint in his eye. "Scared? You don't need our help to deal with one little first year, surely?"

"No, of course not." snapped Draco, trying not to sound rattled. "Alright, if you two want to pig out, fine. I'll go on my own." And with that, he stormed out.

Deanna and Rianne watched in satisfaction. "Too easy. Just too easy." breathed Deanna.

"Isn't it." Rianne agreed. "Come on, let's go. I wouldn't miss this for the world."

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Just as Rianne and Deanna had predicted, Draco wasted no time in collaring Ginny. He was on her before she'd even left the Entrance Hall.

"Afternoon, Weasel. Feeling a little more sociable now?"

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Ginny snapped at him. Now that she was alone with him, with Deanna and Rianne nowhere in sight, she felt her earlier bravado begin to waver.

"Want? Why, a look in that little treasure chest, of course! Don't be shy, Weasley. We're housemates, aren't we?"

Ginny was not fooled by the smile. "Nothing doing. I'm not letting you anywhere near it."

"Ah, now that's a shame." Draco pouted, running a finger down the terrified girl's face. Deanna, where are you? she thought, her eyes darting towards the door. Draco was still speaking. "Because I like you, Weasel, I really do, and I'd hoped to do this the civilised way. However, if you're going to be difficult about it..." He made a grab for the box and tried to snatch it out of her hands.

"No!" Ginny yelled as she fought for it. "It's mine, leave it alone!" She shot another glance at the door to the Great Hall, and this time she was in luck. Deanna and Rianne were watching, wands out and knowing grins on their faces. Even better than that, though, was the presence of Fred and George behind them, also armed and ready.

With the knowledge that her older brothers and her Slytherin mentors were ready to jump in as soon as needed, Ginny felt her confidence return. With one final effort to at least make it halfway convincing, she let him snatch it out of her hands.

"And now, Weasel, we shall see exactly what's so valuable I'm not allowed to see it." Draco gloated as he reached for the catch.

"Hold it right there." Deanna's voice rang out, halting Draco in his tracks. "Leave Ginny alone."

"Not you again." snapped Draco. "Honestly, it's like being the bad guy in a bloody Scooby Doo cartoon with you around. I feel like my next line should be 'Drat! I would have got away with it if it hadn't been for you pesky kids.'" He turned around. Deanna had stormed into the room and was now standing there, feet apart, wand pointed at him in the position beloved of law enforcement types everywhere.

"Well, this pesky kid's currently calling a halt to things. Malfoy, give Ginny her present back."

Draco drew his own wand and got up, turning to face her with his usual humility.
"Make me."

"Malfoy, I'm warning you. Give Ginny back her present or you'll be sorry. Very sorry." There was menace in her voice, but when Ginny caught her eye, she could have sworn she saw the ghost of a smile flicker around her lips.

"And what if I decide not to?" Draco taunted her. "What if I decide I'm going to open it anyway? What are you going to do then?"

"Put it this way," said Deanna, turning to grin at Rianne and the twins, who were all now grinning in anticipation, like lions watching the fat idiot tourist who insists on getting out of the people-carrier to have his photo taken with them despite his wife's horrified pleas because after all they're only bigger versions of little Tiddles at home, "if you so much as lift the lid of that box, you'll regret it. Big time."

Draco just laughed. "Do your worst, Tyler."

To his surprise, Deanna didn't react. She just shrugged, tucked her wand in her robes and stood back, arms folded. "OK. OK, have it your way. Go ahead and open it. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

Now Draco may not have known what was going to happen, but he was still a Slytherin and by no means a stupid one. And this apparent, sudden and very out of character indifference of Deanna's was not a good sign. Draco looked at the box again. It occurred to him maybe Deanna hadn't been talking about anything she was going to do to him. It also occurred to him that although Ginny had said it was a present from her brothers, she hadn't said which ones...

"You know, all of a sudden, I'm not really that bothered. It's only a box after all. Ginny can have it back if she wants. Here you are, Ginny." He handed the box back.

And was even more disconcerted to see Ginny step back and look at Deanna, as if seeking advice on what to do.

It was Rianne who broke the impasse.

"Bored? Already? What, not curious at all? Not like you, Malfoy. Not like you at all." She stepped into the room, a steely glint in her eyes. "You're not... scared, are you?"

"Scared?" Draco's caution evaporated. No one called a Malfoy frightened. No one. "Of course I'm not scared!"

"Oh good." smiled Rianne. "Because I'm sure the rest of the Slytherin common room would be very disappointed to hear that Draco Malfoy isn't quite as dashing and daring as he's made out to be. Crabbe and Goyle for example. I expect they'd be most unhappy to discover that Draco Malfoy is in fact a great big wuss."

"I am not a wuss!" yelled Draco.

Deanna took up the thread next. "Then there's Pansy Parkinson. She thinks the world of you, you know. You wouldn't want to shatter her illusions, would you? Poor girl. There she is, thinking you're a big, strong boy and all the time you're really a craven coward. You know, for the first time in my life, I actually feel sorry for her."

"I am not a coward!"

"Oh no? Prove it." Deanna leered at him, putting him on the spot in the same way which he had done to countless others before, but had never yet faced himself. And now Draco was beginning to wonder if perhaps being so belligerent when on his own was such a good idea.

Fred and George, not to be outdone, made their own entrances. "What's this? Draco Malfoy being a coward? Bet the other Gryffindors'll love to hear that. He's not that popular up in Gryffindor Tower, is he Fred?"

"No he is not, George. Harry and Ron, for example. They can't stand him. I bet they'd love to hear how the Great Draco is scared of a little girl's Christmas present, wouldn't they?"

"Indubitably, Fred."

"I... am... not... SCARED!" screamed Draco, unable to handle the thought of Ron Weasley, of all people, laughing at him.

"Not scared? OK. Open the present then." Fred was now standing alongside Deanna, arms folded in the same air of expectation.

"Yeah, go on, Malfoy. We're waiting." George took up position on Deanna's other side.

Draco looked from the three fourth years, to Ginny, now staring up at him with the curiosity of a five year old expecting a treat, all her previous fear gone, to Rianne, leaning back against the far wall, watching him with a small yet terrifying smile on her face. Then to the box, sitting innocuously enough on the floor, awaiting his attentions.

Steeling himself, Draco knelt down in front of it. After all, it was only Ginny's Christmas present. What could possibly be dangerous about it? Reaching out, he undid the catch.

And fell back screaming.

"Flamin' Hades! What is that?" he shouted, propping himself up on one elbow, gazing in horror at the giant snake that had leapt out at him.

"It's a King Cobra." grinned Rianne, the only one to maintain any composure as Deanna and the three Weasleys had burst out laughing.

"Biggest ***king cobra I've ever seen in my life!" gasped Draco, hauling himself to his feet. He dusted himself down and spent a few minutes regaining his composure. And became aware of two things. Firstly, that the giant snake was in fact made of paper and cardboard and mounted on a spring, held together by magic and copious amounts of Spellotape. And secondly, that everyone in the room, without exception, was laughing at him.

"You bastards. You complete and utter bastards!" Draco fumed at them. "You knew, didn't you!"

"Course we did, Malfoy." sniggered Fred. "Who do you think bought it?"

"I hate you lot." Draco shot glares at all five of them, with no effect. Well, technically they weren't completely without effect; after all, they did cause the recipients to laugh even harder. However, that hadn't quite been what he'd been aiming at. So Draco fell back on what he usually did when threats didn't work. Sulking.

"I'm going back the common room. I shall deal with you lot later. This did not happen. I am unaffected. There was no snake-in-the-box. It was all a hallucination. Goodbye." And with that, he turned on his heel and was gone.

The silence which greeted this little speech soon descended into giggles once more, as even Rianne couldn't help bursting out laughing.

"Oh man." gasped Deanna, wiping tears from her eyes. "How perfect was that? Are we the masters or what?"

"Deanna Tyler, you rule." choked Fred. "And you, Rianne Stormosi, are undoubtedly the Queen of, well, everything."

"Thank you." Rianne bowed briefly. "As a mark of gratitude, you boys can be the Princes of Prankdom in my little Empire. Deanna's already Grand Vizier though."

"What about me?" Ginny piped up. Her brothers immediately ran to her side and prostrated themselves before her.

"You, wonderful little sister, can be the Crown Princess and Heir Apparent." said Fred.

"Couldn't have put it better myself. Gin, you were great! That was brilliant! We couldn't have done it better ourselves, certainly not at your age. We take our hats off to you." George bowed to her.

"Tell you what though." Fred nudged his twin. "This having a Slytherin in the family, it's not bad, is it? We could do with someone who's nice and devious, yet also able to put on a convincing facade of trustworthiness and innocence. We can't do that, you see. For some reason, Mum thinks we're always up to something."

"That's because you are." Deanna pointed out.

"Well, yes, but that's not the point." George explained. "Point is, no one in our family trusts us anymore. Apart from Ron, but that's different, he'll fall for anything. Ginny, on the other hand, is the darling of everybody's eye, everybody's favourite Weasley and far too nice to get up to anything. And she's got the cutesy charm to keep it that way. Haven't you Gin?" Ginny nodded enthusiastically.

"So what do you say, sis? Fancy being our little partner in crime? Slytherin cunning and manipulation mixed with Gryffindor nerve and daring?"

"Go on then!" giggled Ginny, shaking hands with both her brothers in turn as they got to their feet.

"And with that, fair Slytherin ladies, we must take our leave of you." Fred bowed to the three of them as he headed for the stairs.

"Goodbye and farewell. Who knows when we five shall meet again? But until then, au revoir!" George bowed even more extravagantly than his brother, blew Deanna a kiss and chased after his brother.

"Look at them. Professional idiots, the both of them." Rianne shook her head as the twins left.

"But they're entertaining idiots. And that's the important thing. Shall we go?" She turned to leave, then stopped, her attention caught by something next to the dungeon entrance, something Draco had not noticed in his haste to leave. There on a small table were two large, round, tasty chocolate cakes. "Hey! Chocolate cake!"

"Chocolate cake? Where?" Ginny raced over to the table and joined Deanna in ogling the cakes. "Hmm, they look nice. Can I have a bit? Can I?"

"As long as you leave enough for me." said Deanna, reaching for the knife that had been so thoughtfully provided by whoever had left them there.

She was about to cut a slice when a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"What the hell do you two think you're doing?" thundered Rianne. Ginny withdrew her hand immediately.

"Eating." replied Deanna, used to Rianne's authoritative voice.

"You will not." snapped Rianne, taking the knife off her. "Two chocolate cakes which just happen to be left lying around for anyone to help themselves to, and you're seriously going to eat them?"

"Yeah." Deanna stepped back, defensive.

Rianne threw up her hands in frustration. "Deanna Tyler, what kind of Slytherin are you? Think, woman! Who, in a building full of teenagers, leaves chocolate cake lying around without an armed guard?"

"Someone who wants it to get eaten?" Deanna suggested.

"Exactly. And give me one good reason why anyone would want *someone else* to eat chocolate cake."

Deanna thought. Altruism could be safely ruled out - no one gave chocolate cake away for nothing. And she was too much the Slytherin to come up with a benign reason.

"They're planning a diabolical scheme."

"Precisely. And whatever it is, do you want to end up as one of the victims? No, I don't think so. Whatever they're planning, we're best off out of it. Come on, you two." She hauled them off towards the common room, leaving the two cakes uneaten behind them.

Breathing sighs of relief, Harry and Ron emerged from behind the suit of armour that had been shielding them.

"Thank Rianne for that!" Harry breathed. "I thought we were going to have to impersonate Ginny and Deanna for a minute there! Bet Malfoy would have loved to spill his secrets to them. Not."

Ron didn't answer. He was too busy glaring at the door the girls had just left by.

"Oh gods, not again." Harry sighed. "Ron. Ron!" He shook Ron's shoulder. "RON!"

Ron started. "Blimey, Harry, no need to shout. I heard you the first time."

"Well answer me the first time then! Snap out of it, mate. What's up, as if I can't guess. Ginny, I suppose."

"Partly. But more my brothers. Fred and George. Did you see them, Harry? 'Oh Ginny, aren't you great? Ginny, aren't you lovely? Ginny, you can be the Crown Princess. Isn't it wonderful having a Slytherin in the family?' No it isn't! It isn't bloody

wonderful, and our family'll never be the same again!" Ron was clenching his fists in rage, glaring down the dungeon corridor. "They don't get it, do they? They just don't get it. It's not cool or fun, or anything like that, and it's not some way of helping them get even better at practical jokes than they already are! Ginny's a Slytherin. She's not one of us anymore. She's one of the enemy. One of them. She's already changing. The Ginny of old wouldn't have been able to con Malfoy like that. She wouldn't have known how. He'd have seen right through her and she'd probably have been too scared to try anyhow. Not any more. She's as good as he is."

It occurred to Harry that if the Ginny of old would have quailed at the mere sight of Malfoy, then he rather preferred Ginny the Slyth. Anyone who could stitch up Malfoy like that couldn't be all bad.

"And you mean to tell me you weren't laughing at Malfoy too? Come on, that was a brilliant bit of pranking, you have to admit."

"Well yeah." muttered Ron. "But she's still a Slytherin."

"Oh so it's alright when you get one over Malfoy, but when a Slytherin does it..." His voice trailed off as he suddenly realised what this was really about. "Bloody hell, Ron, you don't mean to tell me you're jealous, do you?"

"No." snapped Ron. But it was not a convincing no.

"That's it, isn't it?" laughed Harry. "You're jealous because they're better at humiliating Malfoy than you! Because they're better at manipulating him, and at coming up with the smart remarks and witty put-downs, and he's a lot more scared of them than he is of you. That's it, isn't it?"

"No!" yelled Ron. But he was blushing.

"It all makes sense now." mused Harry. "Back in Diagon Alley, when Malfoy was taunting you and you let fly at him. Who was it got you out of trouble then? Deanna and Luella, who beat him at his own game and sent him scurrying back to his dad. You spent the entire journey home complaining about how you didn't need help from Slytherins and how you could have sorted Malfoy out on your own. Why did we never see it before? You're jealous! Especially now that your little sister's one and in the space of three months is better at tricking Malfoy than you are."

"I AM NOT JEALOUS OF GINNY!!" Ron shouted. "Or Tyler. Or Martin. Or ANY of the Slytherins! They're scumbags, all of them! And I definitely don't want to be one!"

"So you're backing out of the plan then."

"No."

"Oh good. For a moment there I thought you'd gone off the idea of being Goyle."

"Hey now, look, I never said I wanted to be Goyle." Ron shuddered. "Let's face it, who would? But I want to do it, just to see their common room if nothing else. Fred reckons Lovegood's done it up like a Seventies nightclub."

"Can't imagine." grinned Harry. "But enough talking. They're coming." He dragged Ron back into hiding and together the two of them watched as Crabbe and Goyle marched in. They noticed the cakes almost immediately. Rubbing their hands with glee and pointing, the two of them started munching away. The Sleeping Potion took effect in seconds, as their eyes glazed over and still with the same expressions on their faces, they keeled over.

The boys rushed out to seize their prey. Harry swiftly removed some hair from each of them and pocketed it.

"Right, that's that done. Now to hide them."

Ron pointed to a nearby cupboard. "How about in there?"

"Brilliant."

Stopping merely to borrow Crabbe and Goyle's shoes, they heaved the unconscious Slytherins into the cupboard and locked it. Then, before anyone could find them, they grabbed the cakes and ran off, phase one of their plan successfully completed.

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Chapter Thirteen Plots and Polyjuice

As Harry and Ron were abducting Crabbe and Goyle, the Slytherin girls were returning to the Serpents' Nest, where Draco was kneeling in front of the fire, examining a large rectangular crate that hadn't been there that morning.

"Malfoy, do you never learn?" called Rianne. "I thought we'd proved to your satisfaction that it's not a good idea to go poking around in other people's parcels."

"Shut up." snarled Draco, his eyes not leaving the crate. He turned to Deanna. "It's addressed to you."

"Thought it might be. Excuse me, Malfoy." Deanna pushed him aside and reached for her wand, before deftly tapping out the intro from Enter Sandman on the lid.

"It's the standard Tyler security system." Rianne explained to Ginny. "Caitlin reckons the usual methods are too easy to crack, so she uses excerpts from Muggle rock tunes as combinations that have to be tapped out with a wand of the same specification as the recipient's. Not only that, the ones she sends to Deanna have to be done left-handed. You would be amazed at how difficult it actually is to crack."

Ginny watched dumbstruck as the lid opened out, causing a golden light to blaze out of the crate. And then the most amazing sight of all - seven brooms rising out of it, gleaming in the supernatural radiance, sleek, shining, inhuman. Hard to believe they were made of wood. Hard to believe they were there at all - they seemed almost wraithlike. Ginny had never seen anything like them in her life. These were the brooms of professionals. The Harley Davidsons of the broomstick world. The sort of broom her family could only dream of buying.

"They're beautiful!" she heard herself whisper.

"They're Firebolts." Deanna answered, in tones combining awe and pride. "Courtesy of Clearwater and Pearce Aeronautics Ltd. Rigel Clearwater's older brother Patrick's an Auror, and Mum rescued him once, so the entire family thinks she's wonderful. So they sold her these at a massive discount. They're said to be the fastest broom anywhere although they're not due for launch until the summer. And now they're ours, all ours!" She was gazing at the brooms in supreme satisfaction, basking in the reflected glory, like a devotee finally granted a glimpse of the Deity, like the prodigal child coming home.

Draco, for once in his life speechless, joined her. For a while, neither said anything, lost as they were in admiring the brooms. Finally, he spoke.

"They're beautiful. I don't suppose there's any chance... I mean, you wouldn't... I couldn't... Is there any way I could just, you know, hold one? Just for a bit. You can have it straight back and all, I won't break it or sabotage it or anything, promise! Please?"

Deanna turned to look at him. And blinked. It was the first time, the very first time, she'd seen Draco without the sneer. He was staring at the brooms like a child staring in a sweet shop window, the light making him almost glow. Shorn of the usual arrogance, he looked innocent, wistful, even cute. Deanna couldn't help smiling. If only Crabbe and Goyle could have seen this.

"OK." she heard herself saying. "OK, you can hold one. Just for a little while, mind." She reached out and plucked one out of the air. The light died immediately. Draco took it from her, placing it lovingly over his knee, stroking the handle with a tenderness Deanna hadn't known he was capable of.

"Gorgeous!" he breathed, taking in every nuance, every fine detail. Coated in silver, the broom had been crafted with the care and attention of a master. On one side of the handle, engraved in fine red lettering, was the word "Firebolt". And on the other, next to the finger grips, this time in green, were the words "Marlie Lovegood, Seeker".

"You got them personalised too?" Draco could only shake his head in amazement at the lengths Deanna had gone to.

"Oh yeah. These are going to each member of the Slytherin reserves." Deanna told him. "We sent the heights, weights, build, sidedness and position of each of us off and the brooms have been customised accordingly. Wonderful, aren't they?"

"Amazing." Draco handed the broom back. "Thank you." he whispered.

"No worries." replied Deanna, packing the brooms away again. "Everyone's going to want to admire them at some point, so we might as well start now and get it over with. Tell you what, I can't wait to see the other houses' faces when we roll up with these little beauties. We cannot possibly fail with these! The reserve trophy's ours!"

"That I don't doubt for a second." Draco was still gazing longingly at the Firebolts. "It would be almost worth letting Marls have her old job back just so I could ride one of those."

"I'll tell her you said that, she will be pleased." Deanna grinned. However, something about that last sentence of Draco's had bothered her. Something about it wasn't right. Something strange about it...

Draco, meanwhile, had returned to his usual sarcastic self, the moment of vulnerability over. "Tyler, note the use of the word 'almost' here. Better riding a Nimbus in the first team than a Firebolt in the reserves, if you ask me."

That was it! Deanna realised in a flash, inspired by him calling her Tyler. He'd called Marlie by her first name. In fact, not even her first name. He'd called her Marls. Something which no one other than her dorm mates and brother did. And something that Malfoy never did. At least, not until now.

"Malfoy," she began, "why did you refer to your cousin as Marls?"

There! He'd frozen, just for an instant. However, Slytherin that he was, he recovered his composure virtually immediately.

"Because it's her name."

"No. It's the nickname of the nickname, reserved for close friends and family only. Just explain why you've gone from Lovegood to Marls in the space of twenty minutes, would you?" Deanna fixed him with a gaze that let him know in no uncertain terms that he was not going to get away without explaining himself.

Draco got to his feet, summoning every inch of dignity he could find. Remember you're a Malfoy, he told himself, trying to ignore the little voice in his head that was chanting yeah, but she's a Tal-y-Rhys...

"Remember, Tyler, that I am also her family." he drawled. "And if I decide to use her nickname, that's my affair." Desperate to get away from the glare Deanna was giving him, he decided that a retreat in search of reinforcements was called for. "Where are Crabbe and Goyle, I wonder. Still stuffing themselves, I don't doubt. Better go and retrieve them, I suppose. I shall return." And with that, he strode out. Reaching the safety of the corridor, he stopped to let out the breath he'd been holding ever since that heartstopping moment when he'd realised Deanna had rumbled him. Draco, you fool! he told himself. It wouldn't do at all for it to get out just how friendly he and Marlie actually were. Already his friends were commenting on how much he seemed to know about Muggles all of a sudden. Last thing he wanted was for it to get back to his father, who would certainly not be pleased to hear that his only son had been playing computer games, wearing jeans, listening to the latest pop tunes and horror of horrors, spending inordinate amounts of time in Exeter Odeon. Bad things happened when his father wasn't pleased, although his mother had usually managed to prevent anything really awful happening to him. No, definitely time to start defusing the rumours. Which meant a concerted effort at Muggle-bashing and Mudblood-baiting. Heading off in search of Crabbe and Goyle, he smiled grimly to himself. Never mind the Heir of Slytherin, the Heir of Malfoy was what the Muggle-lovers of Hogwarts really ought to be scared of.

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"OK, someone tell me what's up with him?" Deanna asked, unable to work Draco out at all. How did someone go from sarcastic to vulnerable to defensive then back to sarcastic and dignified again? It wasn't natural. And what was up with him and Marlie?

"Well, Tyler, there are various theories that could account for why Malfoy's gone weird on us." Rianne drawled. "However, I think the most likely is that he's male."

"You don't say."

"What's that got to do with it?" Ginny asked, eyes darting from one to the other. Deanna and Rianne gave each other condescending are-you-going-to-tell-her-or-am-I looks. It was Rianne who took up the challenge.

"Because, Ginny dear, you'll find as you get older that men are touchy creatures indeed, more so than Deanna here, in fact. And they absolutely hate being made fools of, caught out, or being seen to display any kind of weakness whatsoever. When it does happen, instead of dealing with it calmly and rationally, they revert to being three years old and throwing tantrums. As we have seen twice now today with darling Drakie-wakie."

"But that doesn't explain why he seemed so, well, nice when I was showing him the brooms." whispered Deanna, lost in thought.

Ginny, however, was beginning to have ideas. "Maybe he likes you, Deanna!" she began to giggle.

At this, Deanna's confusion vanished as a mask of cold, hard, fury slammed down across her face. "He had better bloody not, or I will personally make sure he spends the rest of the year in the hospital wing! I don't want the little creep anywhere near me!"

"Didn't seem that way when you were showing him Marlie's Firebolt." Ginny muttered under her breath. However, she knew better than to say such things out loud in Deanna's hearing. Her reaction to the thought that Malfoy might have feelings for her had been aggressive enough. Ginny did not want to think about how she might respond to the insinuation that it might be mutual.

"I wouldn't worry about it, DT. I think he was just too entranced by the sight of these rather nice Firebolts to be sarcastic to you." Rianne picked up the one with Crabbe's name on it and began stroking it gently. "They are nice, aren't they?"

"Beautiful." Deanna agreed, searching through the crate for her own. "Ginny, come over here, get a look at these." And as Ginny went over to inspect them for herself, the conversation switched to other things. However, Deanna could not stop wondering why Draco Malfoy was suddenly calling his cousin Marls. While Ginny, her suspicions now very much aroused, was even more intrigued by Malfoy, and how underneath the usual cruel, mocking exterior, lurked the ghost of an entirely different boy, sweet, innocent, vulnerable, nice even. (Well, OK, maybe that was going a bit too far.) Very strange indeed. Yes, Draco Malfoy definitely merited further investigation...

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It was not more than half an hour or so before Draco returned, this time with Crabbe and Goyle in tow. At least, they looked like Crabbe and Goyle, to Ginny and Deanna's unconcerned eyes.

"Hello, the heavies are back." Deanna muttered before returning to her broom. Ginny, her earlier bravery when faced with Malfoy evaporating when confronted by his two rather intimidating bodyguards, swiftly looked away, becoming very interested in the handle of Marlie's broom.

"Still playing with your toys?" Draco sneered as he sauntered into the room. "Really, Tyler, surely you're a bit too old for that by now?"

"These ain't toys, Malfoy." Deanna replied, not even bothering to look at him. "These are the real thing. Aren't they, Ri?"

"Yes, Deanna." said Rianne, her attention elsewhere. Crabbe and Goyle, to be exact. She'd noticed something odd about them when they'd come in. Normally so imposing and aggressive, they'd walked in hesitantly, as if they weren't certain about being there. And their first reaction on entering had been to blink, rub their eyes and stare around the common room as if they couldn't believe their eyes. Well, you couldn't really blame them. The Slytherin common room had never been that similar to the rest of the houses, and the arrival of Marlene Lovegood had changed it beyond recognition.

A long, windowless, stone room, with an ornate granite fireplace built in, decorated with carvings of snakes across the top, dragons at the side and two stone gargoyle statues on either side and a gilt-edged mirror above it, the common room wasn't too different in that respect. Nor were the bookshelves against the wall, containing a few common magical reference works, and various political treatises on how to gain power and crush one's enemies mercilessly while at the same time remaining popular and well liked (authors ranged from Sun Tzu and Machiavelli to Dale Carnegie and Dogbert) completely out of place - after all, the other common rooms did have bookshelves too, although, Ravenclaw aside, they tended to be less well-thumbed than the ones here. And the antique oak and mahogany tables and chairs weren't very different to the ones elsewhere in the school. What was really different was the decorations.

The perennial problem of there never being enough seats had been solved as only Marlie could have solved it. Beanbags of various shades, mostly black, (although there was that one Care Bears one that Marlie had been desperate to get out of her house at any cost), inflatable chairs with Anti-Sharp Things Charms on them to deter the Slytherin cats from using them as claw sharpeners plus a few large cushions provided more than enough seating for those unpretentious enough to put up with it, while the lower eye-level had been compensated for by a selection of small tables with shatterproof glass tops and bizarrely shaped central legs, one in the shape of a mermaid lounging on a rock, another in the shape of an apple tree, another in the shape of a dolphin, and so on. There were also various rugs around the place, varying from handwoven ethnic ones (handwoven by whom, and the exact ethnicity thereof unknown, but they were surely the product of an ethnic group of some kind), to fake animal skin, to a rather expensive looking Persian one in the centre of the room. While the walls, previously covered with tapestries which none of the Slytherins had really liked, were now decked out with various posters, including lots of Salvador Dali, Escher, and one called the Great Bear which resembled a map of the London Underground.

And then there was the lighting. The Slytherin common room was still pretty dark. But the darkness was broken here and there by dancing shapes and bright colours that seemed completely at odds with the rest of the room. At every table, either a lava lamp, a plasma globe or a fibre optic lamp of one colour or another. Attached to the ceiling, a couple of large mirror balls and some spotlights, which could change colour,

flash on and off or change angle according to the inhabitants' whim, and which definitely brightened the place up a bit. While it was still gloomy, you couldn't call it dull. In fact, it was probably the only room in Hogwarts to successfully combine gothic darkness with the brightest visual effects anywhere.

Fred the Cactus still had pride of place near the fire, with some fibre optic lights draped round him and a gleaming silver star positioned on top. The reasoning had been that seeing as they already had a plant that was bigger than some of the first years, there wasn't really any point getting hold of a tree. So they'd decorated Fred instead.

Finally, there was the one innovation that everyone, without exception, had fallen behind one hundred per cent. Most of the dungeons, and prior to Marlie Lovegood's second year, the Serpent's Nest had been no exception, had a very distinctive smell, a smell of damp and mildew, a smell of mould, of hidden things, of things denied the light for a very long time indeed, of decay. And the Slytherins had picked it up too, taking it with them on their hair, their clothes, their belongings, out of the common room and into the rest of the school, so that the dank, musty smell of the dungeons lurked wherever Slytherins went, becoming irretrievably and unconsciously associated with them, no doubt contributing to the hate the rest of the houses felt for them. No longer.

Four air purifiers had been strategically placed around the room, sucking the mould and dust out of the air and replacing it with a steady current of fresh, ionised air that made the atmosphere feel like that of a summer evening just after a thunderstorm. Three large dehumidifiers hummed quietly away in the background, drying out the air and getting rid of the damp that had ruined so many designer robes. True, it did mean there was a constant humming noise in the background, but most of them soon got used to that, and the fact that the common room no longer felt like a dungeon but was actually now quite a pleasant place to be was a benefit no one was willing to give up. Besides, for most of the time, the music coming from the massive state of the art stereo system in the corner effectively drowned it out.

All in all, it was a room any student would be proud to call their own. And the Slytherins liked it. Well, some of them did. Some of them thought it was a bit tasteless, while others disapproved of all the Muggle influences. But no one could be bothered to change it, and all were now used to it, so the student bedroom look was there to stay. Certainly no one was in the least bit surprised by it any more.

Which is why Rianne had been rather intrigued to see Crabbe and Goyle walk in, take one look, and stare about them in shock. Crabbe in particular looked furious, while Goyle could only gaze mutely at it all. Rianne had been particularly pleased to see Crabbe notice the stereo, grab Goyle's sleeve, point and mouth "Look at that!" to his friend, quite clearly jealous. She'd also been rather gratified to notice the two of them sniffing the air, hit by the contrast between the musty air in the corridor and the fresh, clean air of the common room. However, the thought had then occurred to her: why? They were after all Slytherin second years. They must be used to it by now. Her suspicions roused, Rianne began to watch them very closely, scrutinising them as only she could.

Rianne was of course, as you the observant reader will have guessed, right. (Isn't she always?) 'Crabbe' and 'Goyle' were of course our friends Harry and Ron, bePolyjuiced and now honorary members of Slytherin. Not that they were by any means used to the idea yet.

"Look at that!" hissed Ron. "They've got a bloody stereo!"

"Never mind the stereo, look at the lights!" Harry had seen fibre optics and plasma globes before, of course he had. But never so many in the same room. It was certainly a contrast to the far more staid and traditional Gryffindor common room. And a contrast to the rest of the dungeons too - Harry, used to the cold and damp of Snape's classroom and the outer corridor, had had to struggle not to gasp as the fresh, filtered air of the Slytherin common room, warmed by the fire and considered to be just right, had smacked him in the face almost like a physical blow. How was it, that the rest of the dungeons smelt so stale and old, yet the home of the Slytherins seemed so clear and fresh? He didn't know. He considered asking Ron, but suspected he'd only get one answer.

"Lucky Slytherin bastards!" Ron was muttering to himself. "The jammy gits! The jammy, jammy gits! How come they get the best common room?"

"Ron, shut it." Harry whispered. "We are Slytherins, remember?"

Fortunately, Draco appeared not to have heard them. Flinging himself into one of the beanbags, carelessly resting his feet up on the nearest table and indicating for Ron/Crabbe and Harry/Goyle to join him, Draco indicated the three girls still cooing over their new brooms.

"Look at them. Just because Tyler's mum saved some idiot Ravenclaw years ago, they manage to get some top flight brooms that aren't even out yet. And Lovegood had the nerve to accuse me of buying my way onto the team."

Harry and Ron turned to see where he was pointing. And for the first time, noticed Deanna, Rianne and Ginny going over some very fine brooms indeed. At least, Deanna and Ginny were. Rianne was watching the two of them very closely indeed. Harry felt his heart leap into his mouth as a horrifying thought occurred to him. Rianne knew about the Polyjuice Potion. And the way she was looking at them was the kind of gaze calculated to strip away every layer of resistance and unearth the truth no matter how long it took. And Rianne Stormosi was notorious for her patience and self-control. She knows, Harry thought. Or at least, it won't take her long to guess. He tried to grab Ron's attention. Without success. Ron was too busy drooling over the brooms to notice.

"The bastards!" he whispered. "The jammy bastards! Why do they always get the lucky breaks, eh? Them and their bloody rich parents with their bloody connections and their bloody favour system! Those brooms probably cost more than my entire house!"

"I doubt they're that expensive, Crabbe." Draco observed. His eyes narrowed, causing Ron to remember too late that he was meant to be a Slytherin. "Anyway, you weren't

objecting to wealth, connections and the barter system when my father got your father out of trouble with the Ministry that time, were you?"

"Er, no of course not, Malfoy." lied Ron. He turned to Harry for help, his eyes pleading with him to provide the perfect line that would save both their skins. Inspiration dawned and Harry duly obliged.

"I think Crabbe's just a bit jealous that Tyler and Stormosi are getting cool new brooms and he's not."

"Fair enough." Draco shrugged. Then something seemed to occur to him. "Wait a second. You two are both on the reserve team! Two of those brooms are yours!"

"They are?" Ron leapt to his feet.

"Of course they are, you don't think Tyler's ordered seven brooms for herself, do you?" Rolling his eyes, Draco turned to Harry. "Honestly, I know Crabbe's never been the school genius, but he's not normally this slow. Are you going to get yours too?" Ron was already heading over to where the three girls were sitting, intent on claiming a Firebolt. Harry, realising that this was no attempt on Ron's part to appear in character but a genuine bid to steal a Firebolt for himself, shot to his feet and ran after him.

"Ron, what the hell are you doing?" Harry hissed in his ear.

"What do you think?" came the reply. "Claiming my Firebolt!"

"Ron! You can't do that, it's dishonest!"

"Yeah? And?"

"Ron, it's not yours, leave it." Harry urged him. "How would you feel if you had one and someone nicked it?"

"I don't have one though, do I?" Ron's voice was threaded with resentment, but there was also a definite undertone of longing there as he gazed at those beautiful Firebolts. "I can't afford one, I'll probably never be able to afford one, and this could be my only chance of ever having one." The resentment returned. "Anyway, bet Crabbe and Goyle wouldn't think twice about stealing ours."

"That," Harry told him severely, "is no reason to sink to their level. Besides, if you nick their brooms, don't you think they'll realise they've been tricked? And they'll definitely want revenge." He lowered his voice. "Rianne and Deanna know about the potion. They'll guess it's us, if Rianne hasn't already. Right now they probably think it's a good enough prank for it to be worth keeping quiet about. Steal those Firebolts and they might change their minds."

Ron was still staring longingly at the brooms. But something in his face changed and he turned away, a bitter half-smile on his face.

"OK. I suppose you're right." He shot a glance at Draco, who was watching them both curiously. "But we'll have to go over there now, you know. Or Malfoy'll get suspicious."

"Alright then. But the brooms stay where they are, OK?"

Ron agreed, albeit reluctantly, and followed Harry over.

"Well?" was the terse response they got from Deanna as they approached. "Can we help you with something?"

"We heard you'd ordered Firebolts for the entire team." said Ron, bitterness giving him that extra bit of authenticity. Rianne scrutinised him carefully. Maybe Crabbe was OK after all.

"We were hoping we could have a look at them." Harry added helpfully.

"Well..." Deanna looked dubious but gave in anyway. "Alright then. Seeing as they're yours and all." She passed the brooms out to them. Both boys couldn't help staring at them as they held the Firebolts in their arms. Harry had seen some pretty fancy brooms in his time, but none like these. Ethereal and ghostly, they barely seemed to be there at all. He couldn't help imagining what it would be like to actually fly one. For a brief, crazy moment, he seriously considered going along with Ron's idea and running off with them. But his conscience wouldn't let him. Not to mention the thought of what Hermione would say if she discovered they'd wasted this perfect spying opportunity on stealing Crabbe and Goyle's broomsticks.

Harry glanced at Ron to see if he was wavering yet. Didn't seem to be, although he was gazing at the broom in awe. Then he lifted his eyes. And looked straight at Ginny.

Ginny looked straight back at her brother, clearly afraid but determined not to let him get to her. For a long while, the two of them just held each others' gaze. The other three did not intervene, although Harry noticed Deanna reaching for her wand. Rianne however laid a restraining hand on her arm, as if to stop Deanna bursting in. Harry looked at her closely. No mistaking the look there. If Rianne had been suspicious before, she now looked certain. However, there was also a definite look of tenderness there, as if Rianne had decided that it was best if they all stayed out of it and left the segregated siblings to it.

"So, Weasley." Ron said, trying to sound nonchalant. "Enjoying life in Slytherin?"

"It's alright." Three months in the Snake House was already having an effect. Ginny was giving nothing away.

"Like the brooms?" Ron indicated the Firebolt in Ginny's hands.

"They're lovely. Deanna says I can have a go on hers later if I want."

"Nice. So, what do you think of the common room then?"

"It's different. I do like the stereo though. Not sure about the fake fur rugs though." Ginny lifted a corner of the tigerskin effort she was sitting on, in a gesture that said more than words ever could. "Still, it's pretty cool overall. Bet no one else has got a common room like this."

I bet they haven't, Harry thought to himself, looking around. It had certainly never occurred to anyone in Gryffindor, not even Fred and George, to deck Gryffindor Tower out like that.

Ron nodded, trying to think of something else to say. Ginny was still staring back at him in that hostile way that was clearly asking if this conversation actually had a point or if they could both finish up and get back to things they were actually comfortable with.

"So, you're settling in alright then."

"Oh yes." Ginny's eyes bored coldly into him, daring him to get to the point. "I'm rather enjoying it, to tell you the truth. Everyone's been really nice to me."

"What, even Malfoy?" The words were out before he could stop them.

"He's been leaving me alone, let's put it that way." Ginny was now looking curious. Surely Crabbe would know all about how Malfoy treated her?

"What about Snape? How's he been?" Ron asked, changing the subject.

At this, Ginny finally betrayed some emotion, a genuine smile lighting up her face.

"He's been really nice to me. Really polite. I don't know what my brothers were complaining about, he's not said anything nasty to me at all."

"What, not once?" Ron could hardly believe his ears. Snape, being polite? To a Weasley? Such a thing had never happened before that Ron knew of.

Ginny shook her head. "No, not once. It's really weird. I've been to see him a few times after class to get help with work and he's always been really helpful. Really approachable. He's a brilliant House Head. I like him."

If Ron had been amazed before, that was nothing. Mouth wide open, eyes bulging, Ron looked like a cartoonish caricature of shock.

"You... like... Snape?" he spluttered. "What, actually like him?"

"Yeah. Don't you?" She was now looking at him extremely keenly. "He's certainly always been pretty good to your little gang after all, at least that's what I've heard."

Ron came to his senses, remembering he was after all meant to be Crabbe the Slytherin.

"Um, yeah. But I didn't know you did, what with being a Weasley and all." Would that cover him? He sincerely hoped so, although he didn't like the way the three genuine Slytherins were looking at him.

"I'm not your typical Weasley though, am I?" Ginny purred.

"No. You're not." Ron had to agree. This was Ginny as he'd never seen her before, a Slytherin and proud of it. Not a typical Weasley at all. He decided he'd had enough and passed the Firebolt back to Deanna. "Here, take the broom back. Keep them all together until the rest of the team get back, eh?" Forcing a smile, he gave the broom away, watching with gritted teeth as the Firebolt, the beautiful Firebolt, slipped out of his hands and out of his sight, his only chance to own one gone, his only chance to hold one over.

Deanna put the broom back in the crate. "OK then. You sure you don't want it now?"

"I'm sure." Ron said brusquely. Please, for the love of Gaia, just shut up and put it away! he thought. Before I change my mind...

Deanna turned to Harry. "You going to hand yours over too, Goyle?"

Harry nodded vaguely. Deanna, taking that as a yes, reached out for it and tried to take it off him. Tried being the operative word. Harry tightened his grip and tugged away, a plaintive look in his eyes. Deanna sighed and pulled even harder.

"Come on, Goyle. Don't be difficult. You'll get it back again."

Whimpering, Harry just clutched it all the more urgently. At least until he caught the glare Ron was giving him. Reluctantly, he let the broom go.

"That's better." Deanna replaced Goyle's Firebolt. "Honestly, anyone would think you weren't going to see them again."

Ron and Harry could only smile weakly, trying to ignore the knowing grin on Rianne's face. Saying a few quick goodbyes, they beat a hasty retreat and returned to where Draco was sitting waiting for them.

"Not got the brooms then?" Draco asked, curious. It wasn't like Crabbe and Goyle to willingly leave something that valuable of theirs in the hands of Deanna Tyler.

Ron stared wildly at Harry. How to allay Draco's suspicions? Fortunately, Harry's inventiveness did not desert him.

"No, we thought we'd keep them all together until everyone else gets back. We don't really want to use them until we're together as a team. Might be unlucky."

"Unlucky!" scoffed Draco. "Honestly, you two are so superstitious. Talent, lads. That's what'll win you matches. Not those lucky underpants of yours, Crabbe. Or that pink rabbit keyring that you think no one else knows about, Goyle."

Harry found himself blushing despite not being the intended recipient of the insult. Ron, however, couldn't stop grinning, the knowledge that Goyle owned a keyring shaped like a pink bunny rabbit being too good not to want to use as blackmail. Harry, noticing the look on his friend's face, swiftly decided that a change of subject was called for, before Ron started laughing at any more of Malfoy's jokes.

"Cut it out, you two." Harry snarled at them both. "Or I'll get the Heir of Slytherin after you."

Ron stopped laughing immediately. Draco, on the other hand, couldn't contain himself.

"The Heir of Slytherin?" he laughed. "Attack *me*? Oh Goyle, you are so naive sometimes. My family are descended from Salazar Slytherin himself, don't you know! His daughter by his second wife married one of my ancestors. No, I doubt the Heir will be after my blood." The laughter faded, as Draco punched the beanbag in frustration. "I wish, I wish, I really wish I knew who it was! I could help them."

"So it's not you then." Ron tried to control the surprise in his voice.

"Of course not, Crabbe. Don't you think I'd have said if it were me? No, I have no idea who it is. All I've got to go on are old legends regarding the Second Heir - after all, Father won't tell me anything about the first. A Mudblood died that time, you know. Before his time of course, fifty years ago now, but he knows about it. Won't tell me though. Reckons I should just stay out of it and keep him informed of events, let the Heir get on with it. So all I've got is the old legends describing the next Heir. Apparently she'll be a Slytherin witch with Muggle ancestry, around our age although her actual age might vary by a few years. Doesn't really narrow it down a lot, there's a fair few witches with Muggle ancestors, even here. The Vetinaris, for example."

"And Marlie Lovegood." Ron added, getting into the spirit of things. He caught the looks on Harry and Draco's faces. "OK, maybe not her." His face darkened as the thought of Marlie led smoothly into the thought of someone close to her, who also fitted the description. "Luella Martin?"

Harry couldn't believe what he was hearing. "She's not the Heir of Slytherin!" he yelled at Ron, furious that he'd even think of the idea.

Fortunately, Draco didn't seem to notice. In fact, he seemed to take Harry's side. "Don't be silly, Crabbe. That Mudblood? Heir of Slytherin? I don't think so!" However, his eyes narrowed as arrogance shifted into sadism. "However, others might be persuaded. Whether she's the Heir or not, one less Mudblood in the school can only be a good thing." He noticed the look of horror on Harry's face. "What's up, Goyle? Thought you hated her?"

Harry recovered himself, remembering he was supposed to be Goyle. "Oh, yeah, of course." he coughed. "But no one'll believe she's the Heir of Slytherin, surely? Not enough to get her expelled."

"Not without evidence, no. Which we just don't have!" Draco pounded the beanbag again.

"But if you found some?" Ron asked, intrigued. To hear Draco echoing his own suspicions certainly wasn't something he'd expected to discover. He realised what he was thinking. Stop it at once! he told himself. He's a Slytherin and a Malfoy, you can't possibly think of working with him! And yet the thought lingered on...

"Oh if we had some, you can have no doubt Pansy and I would be straight to McGonagall about it, not to mention my father."

"What, not Snape?" asked Harry.

Draco snorted. "As if! There's no way he'd ever take seriously anything we said about his beloved little Luella. The way he favours her and Tyler, it's disgusting." If Draco was aware of the irony in that sentence, he didn't show it. "No, it'll have to be McGonagall, she's a lot more fair minded and far easier to manipulate. Pansy hates that little clique as much as we do, you know. Like you two, she wants revenge. And wouldn't getting Deanna Tyler's little Mudblood friend expelled be the perfect method. Poetic justice, I'd say."

"I'll bet." Ron whispered. Unlike Harry, who was staring incomprehensibly at Draco, Ron knew exactly what he was referring to. Marlie Lovegood's brush with death and Deanna Tyler's avenging of it had been a hot topic around the Weasley dinner table for months.

He was jerked out of his reverie by a nudge from Harry. Ron glanced up and noticed with a shock that Harry's robes were getting increasingly loose. Not to mention the fact that Goyle's close cropped hair was slowly beginning to grow out into the uncontrolled mop that Harry normally sported. The potion must be wearing off, Ron realised. Time to go. He got up.

"I need to go to the hospital wing." he announced. "All that Christmas dinner's doing my stomach no good."

"I'll come with you - I'm not feeling well either." said Harry, hoping against hope that Draco hadn't noticed the streaks of ginger beginning to appear in Crabbe/Ron's hair.

"Ah, the perils of gluttony." Draco observed, a wry grin on his face. "When will you two ever learn? Go on, get out of here. Don't want you two stinking the dorm out tonight, after all."

Glad of the reprieve, Harry and Ron said a few quick goodbyes and beat a hasty retreat to the safety of the first floor toilets.

Rianne watched them go. They hadn't been seated close enough for her to overhear the conversation, but that didn't mean she'd not been observing them. And their sudden exit had only served to confirm her suspicions.

"Mr. Crabbe and Mr. Goyle are leaving in rather a hurry, aren't they?" she observed to Ginny.

Ginny had also been glancing in Crabbe and Goyle's direction throughout, intrigued by Crabbe's sudden interest in her wellbeing and relative ignorance of things he should really have known. "They are, aren't they? What's up with them, Ri? They're definitely not themselves. Far too nice."

"No." Rianne grinned. "They're certainly not themselves. Are they, Deanna?"

Deanna looked up from her Firebolt. "They looked like Crabbe and Goyle to me. Not many ways of making yourself look exactly like another person. You'd have to use Polyjuice Potion or something to look that convincing." The Knut dropped as Deanna realised where else she'd heard Polyjuice Potion mentioned not too long ago. "Ri, you're kidding."

"I'm not. I thought there was something odd about them as soon as they walked in, and Crabbe's interest in Ginny here just confirmed it." Rianne grinned in triumph.

"Confirmed what?" asked Ginny, looking from Deanna to Rianne inquisitively.

"That 'Crabbe' and 'Goyle' were none other than our dear friends Harry and Ron." Rianne smiled, watching the expression on Ginny's face turn from curiosity to shock with a twisted kind of delight.

"Harry and Ron!" gasped Ginny. "But how? And why?"

"As to why, I have no idea. Some kind of prank on Malfoy, I imagine. But Deanna and I know exactly how."

"Polyjuice Potion." Deanna explained. "We caught Ron and Hermione brewing it earlier this term. We didn't ask them what they planned to do with it. Now we know."

"We do indeed." Rianne agreed. "Come on. Let's go and catch up with them. Find out the story behind this little stunt." Pausing only to make sure the Firebolts were properly secure, the three girls went in search of Harry and Ron.

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It didn't take long to find what they were looking for. As they emerged into the Entrance Hall, the sound of banging mingled with two male voices shouting and cursing met their ears.

It seemed to be coming from a cupboard under the stairs. Someone was thumping the door from inside, demanding to be let out immediately. While outside the door were two neatly arranged pairs of shoes which all three girls recognised as belonging to Crabbe and Goyle.

"Looks like our suspicions were correct." commented Rianne.

"Blimey, they did do their homework, didn't they?" remarked Deanna, impressed that two individuals as lacking in guile as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley could come up

with a plan that complex and actually have it succeed. Must have been Hermione's idea, she decided.

"They don't sound happy, do they?" Ginny was beginning to feel a little worried. Crabbe and Goyle's intense dislike of Deanna Tyler and anyone who called her a friend was well known, as was Deanna's delight in taunting Draco Malfoy and anyone who called him a friend. The fact that Crabbe and Goyle were not in the best of moods, while Deanna was looking particularly gleeful at their predicament did not bode well. Ginny could only hope that the advantage of numbers would persuade Crabbe and Goyle not to rise to the bait which Deanna was almost certain to provide them with.

"Better let them out, I suppose." Rianne was saying, raising her wand. "Fun as it is to hear them suffering. *Alohomora!*"

The door sprang open, revealing Crabbe and Goyle sitting there, their fists clenched in mid-pound, staring up at them, the expressions on their faces changing swiftly from fury to embarrassment.

For a moment, no one spoke. It was Deanna who broke the silence.

"Crabbe, what exactly are you doing in a cupboard?" The voice sounded innocent enough, but you did not need Slytherin sensitivity to pick up the laughter threatening to escape.

"What's it to you?" snarled Crabbe, less than happy at having being made to look like an idiot in front of his worst enemy.

"Nothing, Crabbe, nothing." grinned Deanna. "We were just curious as to what you two were doing in that cupboard, that's all."

"Nothing that concerns you." grunted Goyle.

"Oh, I see." Rianne said, in a way which indicated that she saw only too well. She turned to Deanna. "A bit of male bonding in the closet, evidently. We'd better leave them to it, then. Don't want to force them to come out prematurely, after all."

"Certainly not." Deanna replied. "You know what men are like about their secret little rituals, after all. Especially these boarding school types."

"Why, what about these boarding school types?" asked Ginny, enthralled. Her brothers had never mentioned anything unusual about boys who attended boarding schools.

"Put it this way." Deanna told her delicately. "In the Muggle world at least, men of a certain background, educated at prestigious boarding schools and of affluent parentage, have a marked tendency for, how can I put this?" She turned to Rianne for assistance.

"Shall we say that the rigidly all-male environment in which they find themselves inclines a great many of them to certain sexual practices which, erm, deviate from the sexual norm, so to speak." Rianne was smiling at both boys in a way which let them know exactly what she was referring to.

"Hey now, wait a second!" yelled a horrified Crabbe. "We were NOT doing *that*!"

"Course not, Crabbe." snickered Deanna. "We believe you. Really."

"We weren't!" both boys insisted.

"I'm sure you weren't." soothed Rianne. "I'm sure there was a perfectly reasonable explanation. However, the rest of the world is, alas, all too willing to jump to the worst possible conclusions. I'm sure we understand each other."

Crabbe and Goyle exchanged looks and came to a decision, namely that the face lost by admitting they'd been drugged and locked up in there was far less than what would be lost by Deanna and Rianne spreading rumours around the school that Dusty Springfield and Barbra Streisand featured highly in their record collections.

"Alright, alright." Crabbe muttered. "Someone left these cakes lying around, and they must have had sleeping potion in them or something, because the next thing we knew, we were trapped in here. It isn't funny!" Deanna and Rianne had managed to reign themselves in and prevent themselves from bursting out laughing, Rianne with more success than Deanna, but both were grinning. Ginny, on the other hand, was beginning to snigger quietly in the background. Deanna and Rianne looked at each other, then at Ginny, before finally giving in and laughing long and hard.

"Stop laughing!" snapped Goyle. "It's not funny!" This, however, just caused the three girls to laugh all the harder. Eventually, Deanna pulled herself together and dried her eyes.

"You're right. It's not funny at all. Is it, girls?"

"No, Deanna. Course not." coughed Ginny.

"Nothing amusing about the situation whatsoever, Tyler." Rianne smirked. "Come on, let's get back to the common room. I think these two have suffered enough. Bye, lads." She shepherded a still snickering Deanna and Ginny back towards the common room, leaving Crabbe and Goyle alone in the Entrance Hall.

"I hate that lot." whispered Crabbe, trembling with the force of his emotions. "I really, really hate that lot! Tyler, Martin, Lovegood, Stormosi, that little Weasley brat, all of them! I'd dearly love to murder all of them, and if it hadn't got my brother kicked out, I'd do it too."

Goyle patted his friend's shoulder in solidarity. "Don't worry, mate. We'll get our own back on Tyler, just you wait. Come on, let's go talk to Malfoy. He'll come up with a plan. You'll see."

Crabbe's anger abated a little. "Yes, he probably will. Damn it, Goyle, why couldn't he have had an older brother, eh?"

Goyle shrugged. "Don't know. You'd have to ask Mr. Malfoy about that. Come on, let's go find him." The two of them made a swift exit.

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By this time, Harry, Ron and Hermione were gathered in the hospital wing, Hermione having been taken there after mistakenly imbibing a cat hair instead of a Slytherin hair in her Polyjuice Potion. Madam Pomfrey had finished dosing Hermione with a Fur Removing Potion and something that undid faulty Transfigurations. They'd told her that Hermione had been researching ways of becoming an Animaga, and tried Polyjuice Potion as a shortcut. Hermione herself had insisted that neither boy had known anything about what she'd been up to. Madam Pomfrey had looked sceptical but to their relief hadn't asked any probing questions or lectured them, probably feeling that Hermione had been punished enough. Hermione had been left covered in cat fur, complete with cats' ears, eyes and a tail, but was otherwise unharmed. The three of them were now gathered round Hermione's bed with the screens pulled round, Madam Pomfrey having reluctantly let them have a few minutes to talk alone.

"Well, we still don't know who's doing it, but at least it wasn't a complete waste of time." sighed Ron. "We know about that Second Heir legend now. How strange, I never thought the Heir of Slytherin would be a girl."

"Didn't think girls were up to it, did you?" snapped Hermione, the experience of looking like some kind of cat mutant doing nothing for her patience.

"No." muttered Ron. "Just that, well, Salazar Slytherin wasn't exactly a feminist, was he? His first wife left him because he was an evil git, his second wife was some blonde bimbo who he married purely because he fancied her, and apparently he had his sister walled up in a convent because she wouldn't marry the bloke he wanted her to. Doesn't sound to me like the kind of bloke to make his chosen Heir a girl."

"No, I suppose not." mused Hermione. "So where did this Second Heir legend come from then? It doesn't make sense."

"It'd help if we knew what the actual legend was." said Harry. "I mean, Malfoy wasn't very forthcoming with the details, was he? I suppose he assumed Crabbe and Goyle already knew it."

"So we need to find out the legend then." said Ron promptly. "But how? I'm not posing as Crabbe again."

"You might not need to." said Harry thoughtfully. His mind had gone racing back to when they'd first put the cakes out and seen Ginny and Deanna advancing on them. "Well, not Crabbe anyway. Come on, think! A Slytherin who's liked by her housemates, generally not considered to know anything about the house legends and wouldn't be suspected if she asked about it."

Ron shook his head. "You've lost me."

"Ginny, you idiot!" laughed Harry. "You could change into her, find Deanna or someone and ask them. I'm sure they'd tell you."

Ron stared in disbelief before digging in his heels. "No way."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "Come on, if you can manage Crabbe, you can manage your own sister, surely."

"I said no! I'm not doing it! I told you, I'm not having anything to do with her."

"Relax, Ron." Hermione sounded weary beyond belief. "You won't have to. There's no potion left, and I can't brew any more like this. You won't have to impersonate Ginny. Of course, if you hadn't been such a prat in the first place and disowned her, you'd be able to ask her direct, but there we are."

Ron opened his mouth indignantly as if to fight back, but Harry stopped him. "That's it! That's what we can do. Just ask a Slytherin straight out. If all we need to know is an old legend, the Slytherins might tell us that themselves. All we'd need to do is ask a Slytherin who's well disposed towards us."

"I'm not asking Ginny!" snapped Ron. "And I'm not getting Fred to ask Lovegood either." he added.

"You're not doing it." said Hermione decisively. "We need someone with a bit of tact who doesn't think they're all scum. Good idea, Harry! Of course, normally I'd be first to volunteer, but we need to ask now and I'm stuck up here. You'll have to do it. Which one are you going to go for?"

"Lu." said Harry, not even stopping to think. "I don't know the others that well. And I'm sure she'll tell me. I'll ask as soon as she gets back." Mentioning Luella reminded Harry of another topic that Draco had brought up. "I need to talk to her anyway, I think she's in danger. Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe, Goyle and Malfoy seem to want revenge against Deanna for some reason. I think they're thinking of pinning the attacks on Lu because she fits the Second Heir profile and getting her expelled as a way of getting back at Deanna."

"She got Crabbe and Goyle's older brothers expelled in her first year." Ron filled in. "Pansy's older sister too. Doesn't surprise me they want their own back."

"But that's absurd!" protested Hermione. "There's no evidence Lu had anything to do with the attacks!"

"Exactly." said Harry grimly. "That's what Malfoy said. They can't do a thing at the moment because they have no proof. But I want to warn Luella anyway. I want to make sure she's on her guard and not likely to do anything that might put her in danger."

"Very chivalric." commented Ron. Harry blushed.

"Shut it, you. She's a friend, I just want to make sure she stays out of trouble, that's all."

"Course you do, Harry." smirked Ron, dodging out of the way of the slap Harry aimed at him.

Unfortunately, the commotion brought Madam Pomfrey running.

"I think you two have had quite long enough, don't you?" she fumed at them. "Go on, out. Miss Granger needs rest and quiet." And with that she threw both boys out.

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A short while later, Harry and Ron were back in their dorm. Harry couldn't help noticing that Ron seemed downcast for some reason, as if something was bothering him, something he hadn't wanted to talk about in front of Hermione. And it didn't take a genius to guess what it was.

"You OK, Ron?"

"Yeah, course. Why shouldn't I be?"

"No reason. You just look miserable, that's all."

"Well, I'm not. I'm fine."

"Fine. Right. Of course. Should have guessed." Ron was obviously not going to talk of his own accord, so Harry decided on a more direct approach. "It's Ginny, isn't it?"

He was right. The flinch at the mention of her name confirmed his suspicions.

"What about her?" snarled Ron.

"I noticed it when you were talking to her today in the Slytherin common room. You looked a bit depressed then. You look even more so now. Doesn't take much to figure it out."

Ron's defiance melted as he sagged listlessly onto the bed. "Is it that obvious?" Harry nodded. Ron laughed bitterly. "Should have guessed. We're open books, us Gryffindors. Everyone can tell what we're feeling. When we're happy everyone wants to know what the joke is. When we're sad, the whole world knows it. Yeah, everyone knows what Gryffindors are thinking." He lowered his eyes. "Trying to find out what's going on inside a Slytherin's head, on the other hand, is next to impossible. I've never seen Ginny like that before, Harry. I used to be able to read her with no problems. Every thought, every feeling was no sooner born than the world knew it. Now look at her. She's so..." he shivered, "calm. So controlled. So... Slytherin." He stared at Harry, despair in his eyes. "She's one of them, Harry. Only been there three months if that, and already it's as if she's been there all her life. She'd never have spoken to Crabbe that calmly before. And yet she held her own. She's enjoying it

there, Harry. She's fitting in. She's at home there!" He choked on the last sentence, in what could have been a manoeuvre to hide a sob.

"Isn't that a good thing?" asked Harry gently. "She's going to be spending the next seven years there, you don't want her to be completely miserable, do you?"

"Rather than her belonging!" yelled Ron, leaping to his feet. He began pacing the floor as sadness gave way to fury. "I don't want her to belong there, I don't want her to feel at home there! I want her to hate it. I want her to wish she was a Gryffindor like us." He stopped pacing as the anger faded away, leaving a desolation that was worse than the rage had been. "I'd rather have her miserable than a Slytherin. I'd rather she was upset and traumatised yet still my little sister than what she is now." He turned to look at Harry again. "She's like a stranger, Harry. I don't know her anymore. I don't know who she is anymore." He sank down on the bed next to Harry, his head in his hands. "I miss her, Harry, I really do. I know we often argued, I know I picked on her, while she told tales on me to Mum, but that didn't mean I didn't like the little squirt. She was still my little sister, and she was still a cute little kid when she wasn't being a pest. Not any more. She doesn't seem like a kid anymore."

"She had to grow up sooner or later, Ron." Harry reminded him.

"Yeah, I know. But not this quickly. Not like this!" Ron shut his eyes, unwilling or unable to say anymore. Harry waited for him to speak again. "Do you know what really hurts, Harry? Do you?"

"What?"

"Snape. She actually likes Snape. She likes him!" Ron shook his head, not able to understand how anyone could actually like Snape. "Can you believe it?"

"Well, she is in his house, Ron." Harry pointed out. "Maybe he's OK to her. Lu seems to think he's wonderful too."

"There's a shocker." muttered Ron. "What is it with all these Slytherin witches, Harry? Why do they all seem to think he's some kind of stud? I mean, look at him. He's not exactly Gilderoy Lockhart, is he? He's not even got charm on his side. Or money from the look of him."

"No idea, Ron. Maybe it's a girl thing."

Ron, now much less depressed than he had been, could only agree. "You said it, mate. Harry, I tell you this, as long as I live, I will never, ever, understand girls."

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Meanwhile, back in the Serpents' Nest, Crabbe and Goyle had made their way back and rejoined Draco in their dorm.

"Feeling better, lads?" Draco enquired.

"No." snarled Crabbe.

"Some arsehole locked us in a cupboard all afternoon." Goyle informed him.

Draco snickered. "You tossers. How?"

"They left some cakes lying around." Crabbe muttered. "We ate them and next thing we knew we were locked up."

"And to make it worse, it was Tyler, Stormosi and Weasley who found us." complained Goyle.

"Very amused they were too." Crabbe was glaring at Draco as if to blame him. "Most embarrassing experience of our lives. What are you going to do about it?"

Draco lay back on his bed, amused. "Boys, if you two are stupid enough to eat any food that just happens to be left lying around, that's no reason for me to use up valuable genius on finding the perpetrators, is it now?" Suddenly it occurred to him that if Crabbe and Goyle had been locked up for most of the afternoon, who had he been talking to all that time? "Hold on. What sort of time are we talking about here?"

"Just after dinner."

"But you couldn't have been locked up." frowned Draco. "You were right here. We were talking about the Firebolts and the Heir of Slytherin, remember?"

Crabbe and Goyle shook their heads. "This is the first time we've spoken to you since dinner, Malfoy."

Draco shook his head. "No, you were right here. You spoke to me, then you went over to talk to Tyler and her mates and have a look at those new brooms of theirs. Don't you remember?"

"No."

"What new brooms?"

Draco fell silent, the brain nurtured by his father into being that of an evil overlord in waiting working overtime. So someone had drugged and imprisoned the real Crabbe and Goyle then impersonated them to talk to him. It explained a lot. He'd thought at the time that they'd not been entirely themselves, and their abrupt disappearance had also seemed a tad suspicious. Now he knew why.

"We've been had, boys."

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Chapter Fourteen The Ties That Bind

Just as every film relies as much on the efforts of the camera crew, props manufacturers, special effects supremos and costume people behind the scenes as on the stars out front, those fortunate ones who glory in the attention and soak up the limelight as if it were as necessary a substance as oxygen (and maybe it is), so the activities of those outside Hogwarts form as vital a part of this little tale as the exploits of the denizens of the Serpents' Nest. Although you could hardly call Caitlin Tyler a backstage worker, nor for that matter Melissa Lovegood. However, it's as well to be aware that there is life outside Hogwarts. One day, it might not be the venue for the action and you, my lovely readers, would be well prepared if you got used to the idea now. But that's a long way off. For now, let's just say that it's time to find out what the other half of the Slytherin Four have been doing.

But before we catch up with Marls and Luella, a little intermission, as it were. It's not the younger generation that concerns us at the moment, but that of their mothers, and one mother in particular.

Caitlin's Christmas had got off to a leisurely start. With her daughter at Hogwarts and her presence not required at the Lovegoods' until that evening, she was in no rush. A lie-in and an unhurried breakfast, followed by her seasonal devotions made up her Christmas morning. While few mages were overtly religious (what was the point of begging the gods for help when magic accomplished pretty much what was required?) it still paid to keep the gods sweet and even someone as irreligious as Caitlin kept the major festivals like May Day, Halloween and the solstices.

Midday, then, saw her dressed in plainish dark blue robes, leaving her house on foot looking less than happy. Christmas was a time for visiting family after all, even those members one found disagreeable, and Caitlin didn't really have a lot of relatives left.

Arabella Figg opened her door, unsurprised to see Caitlin on the doorstep. The old witch's nose wrinkled in what could have been disgust or contempt.

"Well, well. Caitlin Tyler. Not completely devoid of family feeling, I see."

Caitlin gritted her teeth. "No proof we even are family, Arabella."

"No proof? My grandniece the Slytherin Redeemer and you have the nerve to say I'm not a Tal-y-Rhys?" Arabella's contemptuous smile had shifted into a malignant snarl. Caitlin resisted the urge to fling a few hexes at her. Quite apart from the indignity of it all, Arabella Figg was one of her old Auror trainers, an ex-Slytherin and despite her years, not someone to trifle with. She was also Luella's great aunt on her mother's side, a Muggle-born witch regarded as at best eccentric and at worst someone to be avoided by the rest of her family.

"True. But you're not part of the line with the title, the land and the money. Are you?" Low, Caitlin. Very low. Arabella had always known just how to get under her skin and Caitlin couldn't resist the urge to brag.

All emotion vanished from the older witch's face. "I never thought that you of all people would be playing the pure-blood card. And your own father a Muggle too."

"I've got nothing against Muggles." Caitlin folded her arms to keep out the cold, although she had to admit, the cold did help one maintain one's composure. "Some of the greatest acts of kindness I've ever experienced came from Muggles, your niece and nephew-in-law for a start. And the worst things that have ever happened to me have been done by my own kind." She shivered, trying not to remember it.

Arabella's demeanour softened just a little at this, harshness being replaced by the merest hint of grief. "Yes, you saved just one life too many from the Dark Lord to stay unnoticed. Shame it wasn't my daughter's."

Caitlin raised her eyes to Arabella's. Staring into them, Arabella instantly realised she'd perhaps gone too far.

"Believe me, Arabella, if I could have saved Louise, I would. Not for anything would I have let Diana's twin die. But the bastards got to her first. The bastards got to her first, and no it doesn't make me feel any better knowing that I did at least manage to save her husband and daughter."

Arabella was looking at her, if not with sympathy, then certainly with respect. "Maybe you're not a feckless young aristocrat playing at being an Auror after all. You've changed, Caitlin Tyler. You've changed a lot."

Caitlin shrugged. "I grew up. We all did. War has a way of doing that to you."

Arabella was still scrutinising her extremely carefully. "You've done more than just grow up. You've completely metamorphosed. The girl I trained up was a spoilt, self-pitying brat who liked all the new powers but hated working for them, and found any actual violence 'icky'. Now look at you. Melissa tells me you work out daily, and you've used the Unforgivables more than all the rest of the Aurors put together."

Caitlin couldn't deny it. She wasn't exactly noted for being merciful. Statistically, she didn't bring that many cases before the courts, for the simple reason that most of the criminals she encountered either didn't make it as far as a trial or immediately confessed to everything. For some reason, most dark mages seemed to prefer Azkaban to interrogation by Caitlin Tyler, although there were always a few weirdoes who actually seemed to like the idea.

Arabella stepped back, holding the door open and indicating for Caitlin to enter. "Never let it be said I keep my guests hanging around on the doorstep. Come in."

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Caitlin followed Arabella into the front room, trying to ignore the vaguely musty smell and avoid the cats that had a nasty habit of weaving around one's legs, an easy trap for the unwary. Arabella had injured herself tripping over them on more than one occasion and Caitlin, Auror reflexes or no Auror reflexes, did not relish the thought of having to explain to the DDAE medics that after years of escaping extremely

dangerous dark mages unscathed, she'd managed to incapacitate herself tripping over a cat.

Fortunately, the cats were all far too busy bothering Arabella to give Caitlin any cause for concern.

"What's the matter, my darlings?" crooned Arabella. "Are you hungry then? Are you? No need to fret. Mummy's coming." She turned back to Caitlin. "Take a seat, make yourself comfortable. I'm just off to feed the cats." She hustled into the kitchen, still fussing over the cats, no doubt to serve up the finest cuts of meat she could afford. Caitlin could just see her producing smoked salmon and caviar for them, or maybe one of those Japanese blowfishes that was poisonous unless cooked in exactly the right way. How was it, Caitlin wondered, that Arabella had had two children and had spent their entire lives terrorising, dominating and manipulating them (or in the case of her Slytherin daughter Diana, trying to), and yet where her cats were concerned, nothing but the best was good enough for them? It was a puzzle, and one which never ceased to anger Caitlin.

She'd not known Arabella's older daughter, Louise Figg-Clearwater, that well. After all, when someone is in a different house (Ravenclaw in this case) and two years older, there aren't many opportunities to get to know them. Her Slytherin twin sister Diana, on the other hand, had been a good friend of Caitlin's, helped by the two of them being Quidditch team mates. It had been quite a shock to discover that Diana hated her mother and had as little to do with her as possible. After all, she'd always got on well with her own mother. She'd soon got used to it, however. She recalled many occasions when Diana had stormed into the Slytherin common room raging that her mother was once again being manipulative/arrogant/intolerant/controlling/domineering/absolutely impossible/delete as applicable. Diana's insistence on loving whoever she wanted to, doing whatever she wanted to, living however she wanted to and generally refusing to be at her mother's beck and call like her less strong-willed sister had caused more than a few fights. Then there was the little fact of Diana's insistence on becoming an Auror, which had really driven her mother crazy. Arabella was a firm believer in witches getting married young and staying home to raise children. This hadn't, of course, stopped her pursuing a career as a Auror trainer (Arabella Figg was one of those witches who firmly supported every rule that conservative society could come up with, providing of course that there was not the merest hint of a suggestion that they applied to her) but the idea of any other woman entering the DMLE (as it had been then) was anathema. Allowances had been made for Melissa - as the newly orphaned daughter of Mandragor Harker, in Arabella's opinion the finest Department Head anywhere, it was only natural that she would want to avenge her father, and only reasonable that her grief exempt her from pursuing what would normally have been expected of her. However, every other witch on the Auror training programme had been in for a rough ride, and her daughter had got it worst.

Even now, Caitlin couldn't help feeling just a little resentful at the way Arabella had treated Diana. She'd joined the Aurors in order to impress her mother and follow in her footsteps, and what had Arabella done? Harassed her at every opportunity. Caitlin had hated her then, and her feelings had only abated into pity because Arabella now seemed so thoroughly alone. There and then, she'd sworn that when she had children

of her own, she'd support them no matter what they wanted to do with their lives. One reason among many why she'd named her own daughter after Diana Figg, changing the spelling and pronunciation a little so as to prevent her getting completely overshadowed by the other Diana's memory. And one reason why she'd never dissuaded Deanna from her dream of being an Auror, no matter how much her maternal instincts had screamed out against it.

Stop it, she told herself. Deanna'll be fine as an Auror. No Voldemort around these days. Deanna wouldn't have to go through what she'd had to. Yeah, right. If she kept telling herself that long enough she might even start to believe it.

She tried to distract herself by looking at the photos on the mantelpiece. It didn't help. They all seemed to be of Louise and Patrick Clearwater and their baby daughter, who must be about fifteen by now. In the year above Deanna, Caitlin vaguely recalled. She traced her fingers across Louise's face. Easy to tell she was related to Luella. Same grey-blue eyes, same chestnut brown hair framing a face just a little too innocent for its own good. However, there was a pained look in Louise's eyes that Caitlin had never seen in Luella's, a look that said all too clearly that this woman was not leading the life she wanted to live, that despite the outward happiness, here was someone with a lot of dreams and ambitions going unrealised, an intellect going to waste. You could tell she wasn't a Slytherin. Maybe the Death Eaters had done her a favour after all.

Caitlin gazed straight into Louise's eyes. No doubt about it, just like Luella. Surely not...? And yet, it would explain a lot about the young Redeemer. Especially the way she hated the limelight and yet couldn't bear to be ordinary, couldn't bear to be just a young girl in a small town surrounded by people who didn't have half her insight. Could be past-life memories coming through. The thought warmed her heart. Maybe Louise's death hadn't been so senseless after all.

She screwed up her eyes in pain, remembering that night. Arriving at the Clearwaters' cottage to find the place trashed, Patrick Clearwater begging the grey-robed Death Eater holding his baby daughter not to kill her, he'd do anything if they just let his daughter go, and on the floor next to him, his wife Louise Figg-Clearwater lying dead, her face frozen in a silent scream of terror.

Caitlin didn't fully remember what had happened next. There were three of them, she remembered that much, one tall, thin and presumably male, another of average height and a strangely regal bearing, female, and the third another male, almost as tall as the first but far more muscular, all in the dehumanising grey robe and hood that was standard Death Eater uniform.

The shock of seeing someone she knew dead at the Death Eaters' hands had temporarily removed all reason, leaving her standing in the door, alone, unmoving and horribly vulnerable. By all rights, they should have killed her on the spot. She never did find out why they hadn't, at least not until much later when she'd realised who one of their number must have been.

The woman had been first to react, flinging Avada Kedavra at her. She'd only just come to and dived out of the way in time, although the other witch's aim had seemed

to go awry at the last minute, almost as if someone in the room had willed it to go off course. The curse had been harmlessly deflected into a hapless pot plant instead.

She'd retaliated, of course, although not with an Unforgivable - at that stage in her career she'd still been too principled to use them - and soon pitched battle had broken out. Not for long, though. The taller man had hit her with a Stunning Charm and she'd passed out. She'd come round to find a shocked Patrick Clearwater and several Aurors gathered round her, all of whom had been amazed to see her still alive. Apparently as soon as he'd knocked her out, the tall Death Eater had snarled at the other two to get going, there'd be Ministry reinforcements arriving at any second. The woman had protested, demanding to know why they at least couldn't finish the job and kill them all, but he'd overruled her on the grounds that killing an Auror in cold blood would only serve to spur the Ministry into actually doing something effective for once. All three of them had then departed without another word. It wasn't until much later that she'd realised that the tall wizard who'd prevented his colleagues killing her could only have been Severus. It hadn't made her feel any better.

Arabella's re-appearance jerked Caitlin out of her reverie. She turned round to see her holding a tray bearing a teapot, milk jug, sugar bowl and two china cups in that fiddly style that makes them near impossible to hold on to and capable of holding just enough liquid to quench the thirst of a small rodent. And topping it all off was a plate of those infernal pink biscuits that all Muggle women over a certain age seemed to think were wonderful.

Arabella set the tray down, seated herself in the best armchair and motioned for Caitlin to take a seat. One cup of tea later, and the usual small talk had commenced.

"So how is Luella anyway? What with one thing and another you've probably seen more of her than I have recently." It was difficult to tell with Arabella Figg, but she seemed genuinely regretful as opposed to bitter.

"Well enough. She seems fine at the moment, although I won't deny the last few months have not been easy on her. Mel told you about the Mark?"

"She did. Poor child, how is she taking it?"

"Surprisingly well. Once Severus had explained what it was and what it meant, she seemed to be much more relaxed about it all. All she needed was a little reassurance that it wasn't evil. Can you believe she thought it was a Dark Mark?"

Arabella did not share Caitlin's amusement. "The Dark Mark is not a topic to joke about, Caitlin. No one who has seen the Mark above their home or that of a loved one finds it amusing."

"And you think I'm not one of them, Arabella?" Caitlin said softly. "I saw my best friend murdered in front of me, and had to watch as the place I'd called home, that my family had called home for generations, was totally destroyed. And the Dark Mark was there, shining above the ruins. They'd put it in place after they'd killed James." Caitlin shuddered at the memory. "For all I knew they'd got Sirius too. Wish they had

now." She took a sip of tea in an attempt to wash away the aftertaste of actually saying his name. It didn't work.

Arabella tutted sympathetically. "It's always the ones you least expect who go over, isn't it? Never would have thought that Sirius Black, of all people, would join You-Know-Who. He always seemed such a nice boy."

"Didn't he just." Caitlin laughed the laugh of one whose sense of humour died a long time ago. "Managed to fool even me. You know, Arabella, that is the one thing that still puzzles me even to this day, how he managed to stop me finding out. I mean, with Severus, although I never guessed he was a Death Eater, once I knew, it made sense. All sorts of little things that, looking back, gave it away. All the little signs that couldn't really mean anything else. But with Sirius, nothing. That was why it threw me the way it did. That's why, even now, I still can't quite believe he was capable of all that. Because up until they arrested him, there was no clue, no indication whatsoever, that he was anything other than the brave, fun-loving Auror we all loved. At least with Severus, I can't say I was really surprised. Hurt, yes, shocked, yes, betrayed, oh gods yes. But not surprised. Not really."

"The only thing surprising about Severus Snape is that having joined them, he came back to our side." Arabella observed. "I'm still not entirely sure why, unless he thought we were onto him and wanted to save his own skin."

"No!" Caitlin almost shouted the word. "No, it was genuine, I know it was."

"You seem rather convinced of that, Caitlin." Arabella raised an eyebrow archly.

"He's not evil, Arabella. Despite what everyone thinks. He came back to our side because his conscience told him to." The words came out despite themselves. And while she'd always intellectually believed them, for possibly the first time, she found herself believing it from the heart. He's a good man, she found herself thinking. He's honourable. Trustworthy. He's not evil. And hot on the heels of that, the dawning realisation that she no longer hated him. In that instant, she knew, without needing to be told, that not only had he been the one to drag his fellow Death Eaters away at the Clearwater house without finishing her off, he'd been the one who'd performed the piece of wandless magic that had sent that Avada Kedavra curse off course. "I'm telling you, Arabella, he's not that kind of man."

Arabella snorted, unconvinced. "If you say so, Caitlin. But I don't believe it myself. They never told you how Louise died, did they? They used Cruciatus on her a couple of times, then put the Imperius Curse on Patrick and made him kill her. And it was your precious Severus that did it. He told me so himself. After the war ended. Confessed everything to me and asked if there was any way he could make amends. Ha! As if anything could bring either of my girls back."

Caitlin froze briefly. And yet this information didn't really have the effect Arabella had intended. Far from being shocked by it, it simply seemed to wash over her. After all, she of all people knew what Severus was capable of. And at least it hadn't been Diana he'd killed. The Death Eaters had got to her long before they'd recruited Severus, Diana having died in action as an Auror in Caitlin's final year. While Caitlin

had already intended to join up so she could fight alongside her, her death had cemented it into nothing sort of obsession.

"Severus did a lot of things back then that he'd later have cause to regret." Caitlin told her, a touch pointedly. "But unlike most of his colleagues, he is sorry for what he did. I tell you, he has punished himself over the years far more thoroughly than the Dementors ever could have. Do you have any idea what his life is like now? His living quarters at Hogwarts consist of an office, a bedroom and bathroom. He's got no family, no one you could call a friend except Dumbledore and Mel, he's stuck in a second-rate job he never would have chosen of his own volition, and you should see the state he's let himself get into physically. I'm telling you, you would never believe that he narrowly beat Sirius Black to the Most Fanciable Male Award in our final year."

"Severus Snape? Most Fanciable Male?" Arabella was clearly picturing her mental image of Severus next to her mental image of a Most Fanciable Male and failing completely to square the two.

"Oh yes." Caitlin grinned. "Sirius never did get over the shock. He was not a happy bunny."

"I can well believe it." Arabella returned. "I ran into Snape a couple of years ago in Diagon Alley, and he's not the most prepossessing of men, although I must admit he has the potential to look rather attractive, if he would just do something with that hair!"

"Exactly." The humour went out of Caitlin's voice. "He used to devote all his spare energies into looking good and keeping that hair presentable. Now he just doesn't seem to care. It's as if he doesn't think he deserves to look sexy anymore."

"Is that disappointment I see there, Caitlin?" Arabella teased.

"Might be." Caitlin muttered, the long habit of evasiveness with regards to her love life proving a hard one to break.

"Ah, you poor darling." cackled Arabella. "Well, never mind dear. He's always been rather fond of you, hasn't he? I'm sure if you asked him nicely and really turned on the charm, he'd smarten himself up for you."

"I doubt it." Caitlin sighed.

Both Arabella's eyebrows shot up at this. "What? You're not seriously telling me he's gone off you?"

Caitlin nodded mutely, not trusting herself to maintain her composure if she spoke. It was not a topic she really liked discussing in front of anyone, but especially not in front of Arabella Figg.

Arabella seemed unable to comprehend it. "But why? What happened? Severus Snape does not just go off people, not people he cares about anyway. It's either love or hate

with that man, but never inbetween. What did you do to change his mind?" Arabella's eyes narrowed, certain possibilities occurring to her. "Alright, Caitlin. What did you do?"

"Nothing!" Caitlin protested, hoping she sounded innocent. "We had a bit of a row, that's all." She glanced at Arabella, who did not look convinced in the slightest. Time to change the subject. "Tell me about Patrick. How is he these days?"

Arabella gave her a suspicious look but chose not to comment. Instead, she launched into one of her favourite topics - how her ex-son-in-law never let her see her granddaughter any more.

"As if I would know. I hardly ever see him. Moved to Cambridge after Louise died and took up a job in the library at their Muggle university. Broke his wand in two and said he never wanted anything to do with magic ever again. Married some Muggle woman and has lived as one of them ever since. Never mind that his family are all mages. Never mind that his children will be too. Never mind that his eldest happens to have a grandmother who'd like to see her now and again. No, we're not good enough for him. Did you know he didn't even tell Penelope about magic until she got her Hogwarts letter?" Arabella tutted indignantly. "Now I'm positively the last person to go on about the superiority of magical blood, but all the same, to have that heritage and not make your children aware of it is criminal! At least the younger ones found out as a result."

"Rachel and Paul, aren't they?" Caitlin didn't know the Clearwaters that well, but they had friends in common, and they'd always been well disposed towards her.

"You seem to know them better than I do." remarked Arabella sourly.

"They're in the year below Deanna's." replied Caitlin, offhandedly trying to play down any connections she might have with the Clearwaters. "I'm told that they're a Ravenclaw equivalent of the infamous Weasley twins, except their inventiveness tends to get channelled into productive things rather than pranks."

"I know." snapped Arabella. "Melissa told me. There's another one who knows more about my own family than I do. Why, of all the Muggles Patrick could have married, did he have to marry Melissa Lovegood's sister-in-law? Still, I suppose I should be grateful. It does give me one avenue of information on them all. I will give Melissa her due, she does believe in the importance of family."

Caitlin bit off the sharp retort that threatened to come out. Instead, she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Time to be going. She was expected at the Lovegood house soon.

"And on that note, I'd better leave you." she said lightly, getting up to leave. "Time is getting on, and Mel's expecting me. The Clearwaters'll be there too, I don't doubt. Anything you want me to say to them?"

"No. No there's nothing I want to say to them." Arabella sat there, resolute in her intention to make her errant son-in-law be the one to make the first move. Caitlin

shrugged, well used to Arabella's sour attitude by now and in no mood to force anything.

"Oh well. Have it your way. Be seeing you next year then."

"You off are you? That figures." It was Arabella's turn to shrug. "I'll just sit here then. All alone. On my own. By myself. On Christmas."

If Arabella had hoped to trigger any feelings of guilt on Caitlin's part, she was mistaken. Caitlin was not Louise Figg-Clearwater, and not possessed of her soft-heartedness.

"And whose fault is that, Arabella?" Caitlin responded tartly. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have things to do. Goodbye." And with that, she was gone, leaving Arabella to her own company.

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On the whole, Caitlin was not at all unhappy to be out of there. Arabella Figg was the only one person Caitlin knew who made her look like an eternally forgiving saint. Caitlin didn't blame Patrick for one minute for not keeping in touch after his wife died. Louise was the only one who'd ever had the sense of obligation and the patience to keep the contact going.

She rounded the corner back into Magnolia Crescent, the absurdly named Muggle street that Caitlin called home, at least until she could find a way to get the ancestral mansion rebuilt. Not that she didn't like the neighbourhood, but when you'd grown up in a house that put Malfoy Manor to shame, it took a lot of getting used to.

First stop was the Tyler bungalow. Caitlin paused briefly by the name-plate on the front gate as she always did. Partly tradition, and partly to deactivate the security wards. She traced her fingers along the lettering, gold on oak wood. "*Tal-y-Rhys Manor. No priests, no traders, no Malfoys.*" Caitlin always chuckled whenever she read that. All the big irritations of the Tal-y-Rhys summed up in one pithy sentence. No Tal-y-Rhys had ever had a good word for the Malfoys. None that didn't have four letters anyway. It was a feud that dated back centuries, right back to when Salazar Slytherin unwisely ditched Rowena Tal-y-Rhys, nicknamed Ravenclaw because she kept the birds as pets, for a Veela whose child would eventually marry into a family of Muggle aristocrats called de Malfois after Salazar decided he needed an army. Of course, their mage-born Malfoy descendants had gone to extreme lengths to cover up the rather embarrassing fact that their ancestors were Muggles, and had largely succeeded. However, the Tal-y-Rhys had known and remembered, which was why the Malfoys had hated them ever since. And why Caitlin, on hearing that Draco Malfoy had pushed his own cousin off the house Quidditch team by buying the rest of them the best brooms money could buy, had gone straight out and used her contacts to get the best brooms money couldn't buy for her daughter. Families, eh? Who'd have them? Caitlin thought with a wry grin as the wards dissolved to let her in.

A change of clothes later, into a blue dress with sewn-in black leather bodice, and Caitlin Tyler was once more ready to go. Time to pick Luella up.

The Martins' door was flung open by a strangely truculent Luella, looking very smart in black Muggle clothes. Unfortunately, the stylishness didn't redeem her oddly sulky demeanour.

"Hi, Luella. Merry Christmas." Caitlin gave her the brightest smile she could throw at her. Grown men had fallen to their knees gibbering when that smile had shone their way. Sadly, teenage girls appeared to be immune.

"Merry Christmas." The chill in Luella's voice matched the December air perfectly. She stepped out, closing and locking the door behind her. "Mum and Dad are off visiting. They said to say hello. Shall we go?"

Caitlin wasn't at all sure how to respond to that. "Erm... alright. Come on." She led Luella back to her own house. A neutral observer watching them would have been hard pressed to pick out the one with the vast family fortune and the centuries-old family tree. Caitlin was walking uncharacteristically nervously, while Luella practically stalked forward, head back, spine straight.

Caitlin could take it no more. Quite what was up with Luella, she had no idea, but she had no intention of cowering in front of a girl less than half her age, and with none of her experience. Once inside, she decided to confront her.

"OK, Luella. Out with it. What's bothering you?"

Luella didn't answer. She was prowling around the front room, gazing at the furniture. Without warning, she spun round, a worryingly manic glint in her eyes.

"Is this where it happened? Right here?"

"Where what happened?" Caitlin wasn't at all sure she liked the direction this conversation was headed in.

"I think we both know what, don't you?" Caitlin had never seen Luella angry before. It wasn't an attractive sight.

"Let us say I have forgotten." purred Caitlin. "Enlighten me." Two could play at verbal fencing, Caitlin thought. After all, Luella was only fourteen, and not a master yet.

Luella laughed. "Forgotten? Does all the torturing start to blur together after a while? You know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about Severus Snape."

"Professor Snape to you." Caitlin hissed. This, in her daughter's words, was going to be so not fun.

"Don't come the responsible adult with me." fumed Luella. "What the hell did you do to him? Wait, no." She stopped Caitlin with a wave of her hand. "Spare me the details, I'd really rather not know. Just tell me this. Did you torture Professor Snape?"

Caitlin sighed, the fight going out of her. No sense denying it, Luella clearly knew, although how, Caitlin had no idea. "Yes. Yes, I did."

Luella blinked, the admission taking her by surprise. For a while, she just stared. Then, the prowling started again, and this time the rage was a lot more obvious.

"Damn you." she whispered. "Damn you!" She spun back to face Caitlin again. "Why??" she screamed at her.

Now it was Caitlin's turn to be wrongfooted. Looking back, she realised that she hadn't the faintest idea why she'd done it. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. All the suppressed and not-so-suppressed rage, hate, resentment and desire for revenge had just boiled together at once and she'd just let go. Now though... Now she'd give anything not to have done it.

"I don't know." she sighed. "He caught me at a bad time, and he just looked so self-satisfied and patronising, I couldn't take it. He was acting like he owned me, you know? Trying to tell me what to do with my life, when he forfeited that particular right a long time ago. Set off the famous Tyler temper straight away. And then I started to get the upper hand, and before I knew it, I was just doing it. All the anger I've been carrying around for years just burst out before I could stop it."

"That is no excuse!" Luella snarled back at her. "Plenty of people got hurt during the war. They don't go round looking for revenge, do they? Why the hell did you have to? And you an Auror too!"

"Which just goes to prove that you don't know what you're talking about!" Caitlin retorted. "I didn't go looking for revenge; I hid from it for years. Revenge found me. And it was vastly aided by my knowing who one of my attackers was, and by the fact that he was fool enough to be alone with me. Luella, what the hell did you expect?" Had she thought the fight had gone out of her? Well, it was certainly back now. Luella was entitled to her opinions, but under no circumstances was she going to allow a fourteen year old who hadn't got a clue about how it had really felt to pass judgement on her. "Forgiveness? Mercy? Tolerance? What do you think I am, some kind of saint? Some kind of martyr? We Slytherins have a saying about martyrs, Luella. A martyr's just someone who couldn't afford a good enough lawyer. And Hera knows, very few Tal-y-Rhys have ever been in *that* position. You think what you like of me. But until you too have suffered what I did or something similar, and got over it without wanting revenge, don't even think about judging me. Because I am not going to allow myself to feel guilty about what other people think of me."

"So you don't actually give a damn about ruining his life then."

Caitlin fought back the urge to slap her. "Actually, I do. Believe it or not, I actually regret it now. And I did apologise to him. In fact, now he knows how it felt I can forgive him. Maybe what I did was necessary for that. Because now he's been punished, really punished. Now he knows how it felt, not just for me, but for every one of his victims. Which is more than I can say for you."

She couldn't have sworn to it, but for a brief moment she saw something like guilt flicker in Luella's eyes. But it was soon gone.

"I don't need to have been raped to know what's right or wrong, Caitlin."

"Maybe not. But there's a world of difference between knowing what's right and having the moral strength to actually do it. And you never know whether you've got it or not until you've been tested." Caitlin fixed Luella with the steeliest gaze she could muster, daring the teenager to contradict her. To her satisfaction, she noted Luella starting to squirm. Excellent. Moralising tendencies were best off nipped in the bud, before they bloomed into hypocrisy. Not good at all for a Slytherin to have too idealistic a view of human nature, not even the Redeemer.

However, Luella soon shook off her discomfort. "Well, you failed there, didn't you? Gave in to your worst impulses straight away, didn't you? Yes, I know what he did was wrong. I know you had every right to feel angry. But why, why, did you have to sink to his level?" Luella's anger began to deteriorate into sobbing as she collapsed into a chair, huddled up, head buried in her hands, the fury dissolving into sobs as she started to look like nothing so much as a frightened child. "Why did you have to lash out like that? Why'd you have to let your temper get the better of you? Do you have any idea what you did to him? Mentally, I mean. You didn't see him afterwards. You didn't have to watch him try and deal with it. You didn't have to pick up the pieces afterwards. Why did you have to drag me into all this?" she wept. "Couldn't you have just left me not knowing?"

It slowly began to dawn on Caitlin what must have happened. No one from Hogwarts had been in touch about a possible attack on Severus Snape, so he must have encountered someone on arrival who'd helped him and agreed to keep it quiet. That much she had worked out long ago. Now she knew who it must have been.

She walked over to where Luella was sitting and perched on the side of the chair. If there was one thing guaranteed to melt Caitlin's icy exterior in seconds, it was someone crying, especially a child. Caitlin, underneath the usual harshness, was a lot more sentimental than she let on. If Severus had but known it, all he'd have had to do to win her over would have been to cry. Too late now, and Caitlin wasn't at all certain it'd work the other way around, not without Glamour anyway. However, Luella was the focus of her attention now.

"I'm sorry." she whispered, taking the sobbing girl in her arms and stroking her hair in an attempt to soothe her. "I'm so, so sorry. I never meant for you to be involved in this, I really didn't. I'm so sorry I upset you."

"Bit late now, isn't it?" The resentment hadn't really dimmed much. However, despite her angry words, Luella was beginning to waver, leaning in to Caitlin and allowing herself to be comforted. Caitlin smiled. Luella wasn't really the type to bear grudges and they both knew it.

"I know, I know. But that doesn't mean I don't regret it. Luella, I'm sorry, I really am. And not just for upsetting you either." Caitlin added. "I wasn't entirely in my right mind that night. In fact, I don't think I've been entirely in my right mind for years. I

just acted without thinking. And I've not stopped regretting it ever since. Don't think I don't feel guilty! I do. I really do. I'd give anything to undo it, if I could. Anything at all." Caitlin's eyes started to mist over as visions of what could have been drifted into her mind. Yes, she'd give anything at all to have Severus trying to seduce her now.

She was brought abruptly back to reality by Luella speaking once more. The sobbing appeared to have subsided, but she was still far from happy.

"I used to really look up to you, you know." she whispered. "You weren't like anyone else I knew. You just seemed completely all-powerful, never letting anything or anyone stand in your way. You never seemed to care what anyone thought, and I loved that. And you were a lot more easygoing than my family. I just thought you were amazing, you know? Just so cool and so fascinating. I loved being around you, loved listening to you talk. I used to fantasise about really being your kid, and that my parents had just adopted me for some reason, or about my parents dying and me going to live with you and Deanna. I thought you were perfect in every way. Not any more." The bitter laugh which followed did nothing to hide the pain and disappointment beneath.

"Oh, Luella." sighed Caitlin, pulling her that bit closer. "I didn't know you felt that way. But I'm only human, love. And I'm not perfect, never have been. No one is, you know. Guess you had to find out sooner or later. Another Slytherin saying: never look up to anyone. You'll only get a sore neck."

Luella was too upset to really appreciate the joke, but she did manage a smile. "I know, but you always seemed different. You and Professor Snape both. You both seemed so much larger than life. Completely unstoppable, you know? Like nothing could stand in your way, and nothing could hurt you. Do you know what I mean?"

Caitlin stifled a chuckle. Yes, she knew. She'd often heard Mel comment that Caitlin and Severus were the two people most likely to get somewhere in life without having to do much for it, Caitlin by sheer force of personality and Severus because potential obstacles would take one look at him and decide that perhaps it might be a good idea to bother someone else instead. Neither Slytherin had ever been considered someone you'd want as an enemy. And in their own different ways, she by means of a charm offensive, and Severus by being, well, Severus, they'd both been equally adept at keeping their real selves hidden.

"Yes, I know alright. And I suppose you can't think that anymore, can you?"

"No. I mean, the two of you have always made me feel safe, made me feel protected. I was never really that scared about being Slytherin Redeemer, because I had you two there looking out for me. I always thought you two between you would be able to protect me. Not now. It's like, before you were these superhuman figures capable of standing up to anything, and now you're just two ordinary people as vulnerable as anyone. And I'm scared."

"So that's what it's about." Caitlin murmured, stroking Luella's hair. "Should have guessed. Listen, Luella. I know you feel scared, but don't be. We're still the same people, you know. And while we're not perfect, you're forgetting that I'm one of the

Ministry's best Aurors, while he's an ex-spy with plenty of practical experience at fighting the Dark Arts. I assure you, you're in good hands! Don't be frightened. Severus and I might have our differences, but neither of us would ever let them get in the way of looking after you. That I can promise you."

Caitlin felt Luella squeeze her hand in gratitude. "I know you wouldn't. But it's still not the same though. It's not like it was before."

"No, I suppose not." sighed Caitlin, still continuing to hold Luella in the way that she'd done with Deanna on those occasions when she too had been frightened or upset, not that Deanna would ever admit to it now. "You should never have been involved in this. It's not your fight, it's not your responsibility, and you have quite enough to deal with without this as well. How did you find out anyway?" Might as well get her suspicions confirmed while she was here.

"I saw him." came the muffled reply. "I couldn't sleep so I went to his office for some Sleeping Potion. He was just coming in as I got there. We talked and I healed him. He wouldn't tell me what happened though. You should have seen him, Caitlin, he looked so empty. So lost. So desolate. Like his whole world had just fallen apart. I lost count of how many shots of brandy he had, but they weren't small measures, any of them." Luella dried her eyes and looked up at Caitlin. "I hated seeing him like that, Caitlin. Hated it. I mean, I coped at the time, but afterwards..." She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was so worried about him! And scared too. So frightened he wouldn't be able to cope anymore. Scared you two wouldn't be able to protect me if you were always fighting. Damn it, Caitlin, why the hell are you two always at each others' throats? Can't you just get along?" There was a note of frustrated petulance there that reminded Caitlin eerily of Deanna. But it was better by far than the coldness she'd been met with earlier.

"I wish we could!" sighed Caitlin. "I really, really wish we could. But he doesn't want to know anymore. Not that I blame him, mind, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. How ironic. As soon as I realise I want him, he changes his mind. Typical."

"Typical bloody men, eh?" murmured Luella, starting to smile again.

"Something like that." smiled Caitlin, relieved to see Luella cheering up. However, there was still one thing weighing on her mind. "I mean, I know he was hurt, but fancy taking out his problems on a fourteen year old girl! What the hell was he thinking of? And once again, guess who's got to handle the fall out. Me again. I'd give him a piece of my mind, except I suppose it's a little bit rich of me to complain after causing the whole mess in the first place."

"Don't blame him, Caitlin." whispered Luella. "It's not his fault. He did tell me to go to bed when I first saw him, but I refused. And I don't think he could help himself. He was that messed up. Probably a good thing I was there, god knows what might have happened if he'd been on his own."

Caitlin felt herself going pale. "Don't! I don't want to think about that!"

She heard Luella chuckle in response. "Knew you liked him really."

"Well, of course I do. He's intelligent, witty and charming, what more could a woman want? But that's beside the point." Caitlin returned her attention to the topic at hand. "He had absolutely no right to involve you. It's not your problem! At least, it shouldn't have been. Damn him." She lifted Luella's chin, gazing into eyes still rimmed with tears. "I'm sorry, Luella. I really am."

"I believe you." whispered Luella. However, Caitlin could tell that she wasn't entirely forgiven. Understood, yes. Forgiven, no. Caitlin could still detect an inkling of resentment for beginning the demolition of her childhood illusions. She only hoped that Luella would one day get over it - after all, it had to have happened sooner or later although Demeter only knew that this wasn't really the way Caitlin would have chosen. Still, it was a start. Caitlin loosened her grip on the girl as she sat up and began to wipe the tearstains away.

"Feeling better?" she asked. Luella nodded.

"Yeah, a bit. Got a tissue?"

Caitlin reached for the Kleenex box. Luella took one gratefully, blowing her nose and drying her eyes.

"Still want to go to the party?" A silly question, perhaps. But Caitlin wouldn't have blamed Luella for not feeling up to socialising.

"Course I do. I'd like to see Marls again, and besides I'll never hear the end of it if I wuss out." Her smile didn't entirely reach her eyes. However, Caitlin didn't have time to worry about it, as her fireplace roared into life. Luella took one look at it and screamed. Caitlin turned round and relaxed to see Melissa's head in the flames.

"Hey, Mel. Merry Christmas! How's tricks?"

"How's tricks, she says. How's tricks? I have a party to organise, and it's going crazily off-schedule, thanks to the Auror Who Is Never On Time. Caitlin, are you coming to this party or not?" Melissa did not look pleased. Caitlin checked her watch. Quarter to five. Oops. She hadn't realised it was so late.

"Um, yeah, course we are. Luella and I had some things we needed to discuss, that's all."

"Well, discuss it later. You should have been here half an hour ago. I've got eight hungry teenagers and my in-laws all getting restless, a house-elf who's run off her feet what with all the cooking and a husband who's being absolutely no help whatsoever, will you please get a move on so I can start getting the dinner underway? Twiglets and prawn crackers will only keep the masses quiet for so long!"

"Don't remember that one in the Rules." grinned Caitlin. Melissa didn't see the funny side.

"Caitlin! Stop being facetious. I will be launching Christmas dinner in twenty minutes whether you are here or not. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Mel."

"Good. Now hurry up." And with that, she was gone. Caitlin couldn't help chuckling.

"Typical Mel. Even Christmas has to be meticulously planned according to a timetable." She noticed Luella staring at the fire in shock. "What, never seen the Remote Floo in action before?"

"Is that what it was?" Luella asked, still dazed.

"It is indeed. Rather like a magical equivalent of the telephone, except as it's done via Floo, you can send items and even people through as well."

Luella seemed to calm down a bit. "Wait a second, I think I have seen it done before. Didn't Professor Snape use it to get in touch with you that night Voldemort tried to nick the Philosopher's Stone?"

"He did indeed. Well done for remembering. But I digress. We'd better use the Floo proper, I don't want to keep Mel waiting. You ready?"

Luella nodded and walked over to the fire. However, she stopped short when she saw her reflection in the mirror.

"Oh my god, what do I look like?" she gasped. "My eyes are all red, I can't go looking like this!"

Caitlin had to admit that Luella had looked better. However, there were ways around this sort of thing.

"Not to worry, my dear. I think we can sort this out. Ever worn make-up before?"

Luella shook her head. "No. Mum and Dad reckon I'm too young for it."

"Well then, it's about time you tried it. You'll be amazed at the difference. Come on. By the time I'm done, you won't know yourself. Go and wash your face, then meet me in my bedroom and we'll get started."

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Caitlin was as good as her word. Luella, on seeing the final result in Caitlin's bedroom mirror, couldn't believe her eyes.

"Are you sure this isn't a magic mirror?" she demanded. Caitlin shook her hand, laughing.

"No, I promise you! It's a perfectly normal Muggle mirror."

Luella turned to look at her reflection again. "Wow." she whispered. Caitlin's expert touch had transformed her from an ordinary looking teenager into some exotic stranger. Very nice. She wondered what Deanna would say if she could see her now.

Malfoy's reaction would also be worth seeing. Not to mention that of Professor Snape. Luella's mind drifted off into fantasies of Snape taking one look at her and immediately falling on his knees pledging undying love.

She was brought abruptly back to reality by Caitlin calling her name.

"Luella? Luella, snap out of it! Yes, I know you're pretty, but not so pretty you can fall in love with your own reflection!"

"Sorry, I was just..."

"Admiring yourself, yes I know." Despite the somewhat reprobating tone of her voice, Caitlin was smiling. "Don't worry, I was much the same the first time I wore some. Come on, we don't have much time. Let's show you off, shall we?"

The reaction at the Lovegoods' party was much as Luella had hoped for. Marlie took one look at her and promptly screamed at the top of her voice "Oh my god! You're wearing make-up!"

"So? You do it all the time." Luella swiftly drew a glamour around them both, not at all happy about being the centre of attention all of a sudden.

"Yeah, but you don't! My god, this is really weird. Like Deanna wearing a dress, or McGonagall getting a tattoo, or Snape shaving his head and joining a punk band!" Marlie stared at her, enthralled. "Looks pretty good though."

"Caitlin did it." Luella admitted. "Reckoned that seeing as it was Christmas, I should be allowed to tart myself up a bit."

"Well, she did a good job. Think she'll give me a makeover?"

"You don't need one, Marls." It was true. Marlie was the kind of girl born knowing how to apply make-up like a professional.

"I know, but it would be interesting to see the results." Marlie turned away, and led Luella towards the rest of the party, which included a lot of people who Luella didn't recognise, but from the look of them, were probably related to Marlie in some way.

"Who are all these people?" she asked in bewilderment.

She immediately regretted asking. Marlie launched straight into her socialite routine, dragging her over to a middle-aged couple nearby.

"These two are my aunt and uncle on my dad's side. This is my aunt, Annabel Lovegood, my dad's sister and a professor of astrophysics at Cambridge, and this is her husband Patrick Clearwater who's the head librarian in the science department. Aunt Anna, Uncle Patrick, this is my schoolfriend Luella Martin."

Annabel Lovegood turned to Luella with a smile. Much like her brother, she seemed laidback, friendly and outgoing - the typical Lovegood family traits according to

Marlie. She also had the rich, golden blonde hair that both Leonard and Mike shared (as opposed to the pale, almost white, blonde hair that Marlie had inherited) matched with a pair of inquisitive blue eyes easily fascinated by anything or anyone that might cross their path.

"So you're Luella! Nice to finally meet you, everyone's been telling us lots about you."

"Have they?" Luella wasn't at all sure she liked the idea of all these people knowing about her without her even knowing they existed.

"Oh yes. Melissa reckons you're destined for great things, although she won't say exactly what. I've heard you're quite ambitious too."

"Well, I-" Luella started to speak, until Marlie butted in.

"Of course she is, she's a Slytherin. We all are. Although it's a bit more obvious with some of us than others."

"No need to tell me that, young Marlie, we all know you are!" Annabel teased. "If it's not that sport you play, it's that other crazy idea of yours, now what was it? Turning yourself into an animal or something?"

"Animagism, and it's not crazy! It's a perfectly reasonable ambition!" Marlie protested.

Annabel rolled her eyes. "I'll believe it when I see it. You do know it's against the laws of physics, don't you? There's not nearly enough energy in the world to achieve it, and no way of harnessing it. Plus it is not possible to change the form of your cells like that."

"There's more than enough energy out there, Auntie, you just need to take it from somewhere it's going to waste and use it for your own needs. All that heat and light from the sun, most of it just goes straight out into space and dissipates. No harm taking a bit of it to power Transfigurations, is there? And as for shapeshifting, it's quite straightforward once you've attuned your subtle bodies to that of your totem animal. Once they're done, the physical body eventually changes right along with it. Easy!"

"I notice you've not mastered it yet." Annabel pointed out.

"Well, no." Marlie admitted. "But it is very advanced magic. And I'm quite close to a breakthrough, I'm sure of it! Rachel and Paul are helping me out and they reckon I'll be capable of it in a few years or so, maybe less."

"Oh wonderful!" Annabel rolled her eyes. "Now you're infecting my lot with it! What do they teach you at this school of yours?"

"Magic." Luella and Marlie answered automatically. Annabel just shook her head, clearly giving up on them both. She was saved from having to argue any further by the appearance of her older brother.

"Marlie driving you up the wall again, is she?" he asked jovially.

"You guessed! Yes, she's on about - what was it again? Animation?"

"Animagism. Dad, she won't believe it's possible. Tell her!"

Leonard Lovegood just laughed. "Marls, as I've never seen it done before, I can't comment. Tell you what though, when you've mastered it, you can give us all a demonstration at the next Christmas party and prove her wrong. OK?"

"Alright then." shrugged Marlie. "You got a deal."

"Leonard, are you even going to attempt to talk sense into her?" Annabel demanded.

"No point. I used to try and tell Mel magic wasn't possible, but after she'd proved me wrong for the hundredth time, I gave in. Now I find it's easiest to just accept it all as it comes."

"I see. Leonard, you're a civil avionics engineer. You're not seriously telling me you believe magic keeps planes airborne? Because if so, I'm never flying again."

"Of course not, sis. Jet engines keep planes in the sky. Magic keeps brooms in the air. One rule for Muggle technology, one rule for magical stuff, and never the twain shall meet, at least not until our kids start messing around at any rate. Come on, dinnertime." He led her off towards the dining room.

Luella turned to Marlie. "Is she always like that?"

"Oh yeah. You get used to it after a while. She makes Carl Sagan look like Uri Geller. It's the academic background, you see. She spends most of her life cloistered with the same people, all with the same sceptical reality-tunnel, all reinforcing each others' views. My dad, on the other hand, has to interact with the real world, and that's mellowed him out a lot."

Luella was still digesting all this. "But how can she stay so sceptical when you lot are all there to prove her wrong?"

"Well, Uncle Patrick doesn't do magic any more, and the kids aren't allowed to at home, and she only sees us at Christmas. So she doesn't really have to acknowledge it in any way. I think she thinks Hogwarts is just a typical Muggle school, or at least, chooses to think of it that way so as to avoid entertaining the idea of magic."

Luella nodded in recognition. "My parents do that too. What is it with Muggles, Marls? Why do they find the idea so disturbing?"

"Gods know." shrugged Marlie. "Come on, let's get some food down us, I've only eaten Twiglets and crisps since breakfast. I'm starving!" She headed for the dining room.

Luella was about to follow her, when something caught her eye. Marlie's uncle, Patrick Clearwater. He'd not said anything during the conversation. Luella had decided that he must be the quiet, retiring type and left it at that. However, on looking at him closely, she revised her opinion. He was staring at her as if in some kind of trance, and had been since they'd been introduced, she realised. And he was making her feel very uncomfortable.

"Mr. Clearwater?" she asked, trying to dispel the tension. "Is everything alright?"

He shook himself. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine. It's just that... You remind me of someone I used to know, that's all. You're a friend of Marlie's, aren't you?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. We're at Hogwarts together."

"I suppose you're a Slytherin too, yes?"

"That's right."

Patrick nodded as if to himself. A brief look of disappointment crossed his face, then he seemed to snap out of it, smiling at her.

Luella felt her heart leap into her mouth as an eerie sense of déjà vu began creeping up her spine. This black-haired, blue-eyed stranger, old enough to be her father, suddenly seemed familiar to her, very familiar. She began to realise how he must have felt. She knew him, surely. And yet she also knew she'd never met him before in her life. Strange. Very strange. However, it wasn't entirely unwelcome. Slowly, she found her uneasiness melting away, as she began to warm to him. She liked him, she decided.

"So who do I remind you of?" she asked, good-naturedly.

"My ex-wife, believe it or not. Your surname's not Figg, by any chance, is it?"

Luella shook her head. "No. It's Martin."

"No Figgs in your family?"

"None that I can remember. My mum's maiden name's Carroll."

"Oh." Patrick seemed to deflate a little. "Ah well. Must be one of those synchronicities that my current wife, bless her, steadfastly refuses to believe in despite the evidence of her own eyes."

"You're a believer then, I take it."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." Patrick chuckled. "Believe me, there's nothing I find more amusing than reading the studies produced by Muggles trying to explain psychic phenomena, whether they're sceptics or believers. However, that's beside the point. I don't need to believe, Luella. I've seen it. I'm a wizard."

Luella looked him up and down. He was dressed in perfectly normal Muggle clothes, jeans, grey woollen sweater and a pair of brown loafers much like the sort her father wore. Not a wand, cloak or pointy hat in sight.

"You don't look much like a wizard."

"No. I don't." The smile faded. "I've lived as a Muggle for fifteen years now. I don't own a wand any more, I don't do magic any more. I maintain as little contact with the magical world as possible, and what contact I do have is with my parents and brother, or stuff involving the kids. I married Annabel precisely because she refused to believe in or accept anything remotely supernatural. Of course, it wasn't until it was far too late that I discovered her brother was married to Melissa Harker. Still, you can't have everything, and it's not as if this is a typical magical home after all." He indicated the wide-screen TV, and the stereo system that dominated the far wall, things not found in most mage homes. The Tylers certainly didn't have either. Nor for that matter did the Stormosis.

Luella remembered Marlie's words. "Uncle Patrick doesn't use magic any more." Most odd. Why would a wizard voluntarily renounce his powers? It didn't make sense. She'd only been a witch for four years, and already she couldn't imagine going back to being a Muggle again. It would be like losing a limb. Apart from getting horribly maimed or mutilated in an accident, or losing a loved one, she couldn't imagine anything worse.

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr. Clearwater..."

"Please, call me Patrick."

"Alright then. If you don't mind me asking, Patrick... why'd you give up magic?"

He hesitated. For a moment, Luella wondered if she'd said the wrong thing. But at length, he did answer her.

"Because some of my fellow mages did something so horrific, so truly awful, using the most dangerous and evil magic ever invented, that I couldn't bear to be a part of that world any more. Don't ask me what it was, I still don't like talking about it. Suffice it to say that it was enough to make me decide that if that was what so-called purebloods were like, I'd rather have the Muggles."

Purebloods... fifteen years ago... something so bad he still couldn't talk about it... There was only one possible conclusion to be drawn.

"Voldemort." she whispered. Patrick froze, and Luella knew she'd hit the mark.

"What did you say?" he hissed.

"It was him, wasn't it? Or his followers." Luella gathered her courage and looked him straight in the eye. "Lord Voldemort was behind it, wasn't he?"

"Don't say the name!" Patrick nearly screamed at her, screwing up his eyes in pain. "For the love of God, don't say it! Just don't!" He took a few deep breaths and opened his eyes again. "Yes. Alright, yes. It was him. Look, don't ask me any more questions. I don't want to talk about it!"

Luella nodded. Fair enough, really. No point pushing him before he was ready. Ready for what, a small voice asked her. Healing, she answered it, without knowing where the words came from. Don't I wear the caduceus after all? She reached out with her left hand and brushed his cheek with her fingertips, gazing straight into his eyes and turning on the Glamoury. She felt her Mark heat up as the power began to flow.

"Relax." she whispered. "Relax, and be calm. Forget I brought the topic up. Only relax. For now is not the time to open the wound. When you are ready. Not before."

She watched him go into the familiar trance. The Mark was still smouldering slightly. Quite a nice sensation when you got used to it, she thought as she let her hand fall back to her side. So much more pleasant when you were in control of the power for once.

Patrick blinked and emerged from the trance. Luella looked into his eyes again, to check he was OK. And found herself switched into another world entirely.

She was lying on the floor, in a room she didn't recognise yet knew without a doubt was her own front room. Not far away, Patrick was standing watching her. Except he seemed to have lost ten years somewhere along the line, the lines under the eyes having smoothed themselves out, and the grey hairs around his temples their original black. That wasn't what shocked her though. No, that was the look in his eyes, the vacant look that indicated that Patrick Clearwater's mind was far, far gone.

In that instant, she knew that he was not there, that someone had him under their control and that he couldn't help himself. And that that person was standing to her left.

She turned to face the hooded, grey-robed figure controlling him. His face was hidden from her, but the eyeholes in the hood left his eyes on view. That was enough.

"You'll regret this." she heard herself gasping. "I swear it, you'll regret this. By the power of the Most High Gods, may your conscience wake from the coma you've beaten it into and never cease to torment you until you've paid for what you've done. And may you too know what it's like to see someone you love suffer like this. And this also I promise - in my next life, I'll find you. Oh yes. I'll find you. You won't escape from me that easily! So mote it be!"

"Very poetic." he sneered at her, his voice hauntingly familiar, especially that particular tone of it. "But it won't help you now, will it?" He turned to Patrick, raising his wand. "Finish her."

She shut her eyes as she heard the words every mage most dreaded, spoken by the voice she'd once most loved to hear. "*Avada Kedavra!*"

"Nooo!" she cried. But it was too late. She felt the curse hit her, and knew no more.

Until she opened her eyes again and found herself back in the Lovegoods' front room. Patrick was shaking her, calling her name.

"What?" she snapped, trying to wriggle away. He let her go, relieved.

"You tell me!" He was staring wildly at her, half in amazement, half in fear. "What happened there? You looked into my eyes, everything went blurry, then I came out of it and you were in some kind of trance. Luella, what's going on?"

Back came the Glamoury. "Nothing," lied Luella. "I was just thinking, that's all. Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing at all."

"If you say so." Patrick still seemed suspicious, but the Glamoury had worked - he was no longer panic-stricken. "But there is a lot more going on with you than meets the eye, of that I am certain."

Luella didn't know what to say to that. Fortunately, Caitlin Tyler saved her the trouble.

"Of course there is, she's a Slytherin. We've all got at least one deep, dark secret tucked away, and most of us have several. I wouldn't let it bother you."

She peeled away from the doorway she'd been leaning against and sashayed into the room, oozing Glamoury.

"You'd better go and join the others, they'll be wondering where you've got to." she smiled. "Go on, get in there. Enjoy your Christmas."

Patrick nodded wordlessly, before making a swift exit to the dining room where everyone else was gathered. Caitlin watched him go, with something like sadness in her eyes, before abruptly switching off the Glamoury and turning to Luella.

"Well?"

"Caitlin, I -"

"Pried where you shouldn't have done and tried to use Glamoury as a quick fix. I saw, Luella. No, don't worry, I'm not about to shout at you. But in the future, please leave people's secrets well alone!"

"Sorry." muttered Luella. She looked up. "Caitlin, what did happen to him? Do you know?"

"Oh, I know alright." Caitlin said quietly. "But now is not the time. We'll talk about it later. For now, Mel is expecting us both for dinner. And you will go in there, eat up, relax, and act like a normal fourteen year old having Christmas dinner. Alright?"

"Yes, Caitlin." Luella said, subdued.

"Good." Caitlin's smile returned, as reproof gave way to tenderness. "Come on then. Let's go and mingle."

The Christmas dinner proved to be well worth the wait. Just about every dish ever associated with Christmas was there for the eating, and the assembled guests lost no time diving in.

Luella found herself sitting next to a girl she recognised as a Ravenclaw prefect from school, but whose name she hadn't managed to catch. However, the mass of curly black hair indicated that she was almost certainly related to Patrick Clearwater in some way.

Marlie was seated opposite Luella, in between two other youngsters who had been introduced as her Clearwater cousins, Rachel and Paul. No mistaking the Lovegood genes at work there - they both had their mother's inquisitive blue eyes, and were a match for Marlie with their mixture of technical know-how and rampant extroversion. Rachel seemed to be the more outgoing of the two, shaking back her mane of blonde curls as she argued with Marlie over whether it would ever be possible to adapt a radio for use at Hogwarts.

"Marls, the signal would never penetrate the magical field, you'd need a satellite dish the size of Norwich to pick it up."

"Cous, you're not thinking! We set up a receiver *outside* the field and run the signal into Hogwarts via a unicorn hair cable. Once we've got it in the castle, we can send it back into the ether and pick it up anywhere."

"It all sounds rather fiddly and complicated." frowned Paul, the quieter of the two. He seemed to take more after his father, having the same black hair and reflective attitude. "I foresee a lot of kinks to be ironed out here."

"Exactly!" Marlie enthused. "Think of the challenge!"

"It'll take ages." mused Rachel. "There'll be more technical things than we've ever dealt with before to be sorted out. All kinds of research to be done. Lots of testing too." She sighed blissfully. "Heaven!"

The girl next to Luella shook her head ruefully. "Look at them. Geeks the pair of them. And Marlie's no better, giving them ideas like that. Honestly, they'll be obsessing over this for months now. It'll be almost as bad as when they were trying to back-engineer the Walkmage. Bits everywhere, the Ravenclaw common room was a tip for months."

"Did they manage it?" Luella asked, intrigued despite herself.

"They did. And when Marlie found out, she immediately made them partners in the business. They now do the Ravenclaw end of things, and they've got more cash than I have." She sniffed disapprovingly before turning back to Luella with a smile. "I don't think we've been introduced, have we? I'm Penelope Clearwater. Fifth year Ravenclaw, Prefect. And you?"

"Luella Martin. Muggle-born Slytherin fourth year. Friend of Marlie's." They shook hands. "Are you related to Patrick Clearwater then? You look a lot like him."

"It's the hair, isn't it?" laughed Penelope, holding a strand up for Luella to see.
"Always gives it away. Can't say I care for it myself."

"I think it looks fine." Luella told her.

"If you say so, but I really wish it wasn't so curly. Your hair now, that's the kind of hair I'd like." Penelope regarded Luella's hair with outright envy. "Straight but not so straight it's uninteresting. Proper movie star hair. And the colour's really nice too."

"It's not that good really." Luella blushed, her usual reaction on being made a fuss of.
"It only looks this nice because I've been styling it all afternoon."

"Well it's still better than mine. Ah, if only genetics had gone the other way, I too could have had hair like that." sighed Penelope. "My mother's hair was just like yours."

Luella turned to look at Annabel. No similarity there - hers was blonde for a start. Then it dawned on Luella that Penelope had spoken of her mother in the past tense, and that Patrick had said she looked like his ex-wife.

"No, not Annabel Lovegood." Penelope had obviously noticed Luella turn round and guessed her assumption. "She's really my stepmother, although I still call her Mum. My real mother died when I was just a baby. I don't remember her, although I do know she was a witch too. I've got photos though, and she looks a lot like you. In fact..." She reached for her purse, opened it, and produced a rather battered looking photo. "See for yourself."

Luella took the photo from her. What she saw caused her heart to skip a beat. It was like looking in a mirror, almost. Admittedly this woman was older than Luella, and dressed in robes, topped with a Seventies hairstyle, but all the same, that didn't disguise the fact that there was a disturbing resemblance. Same eyes, same hair, same nose, same cheekbones. About the only difference was the look in her eyes. She was smiling, but the eyes contained a quiet desperation that belied the happiness. What Luella most registered about her was that this woman was deeply unhappy.

"She looks so sad." Luella whispered.

"You noticed that." Penelope did not sound surprised in the least. "I always wondered about that too. Dad tells me she was forever getting bullied by her mother though, so maybe that has something to do with it. I think she wanted a career too, but felt her mother wouldn't approve, so she got married instead. I do feel sorry for her sometimes. Poor thing, she must have been so trapped."

"I'll bet." Luella found herself trying to imagine what it must have been like for her, having all sorts of dreams, intelligence and the typical Ravenclaw curiosity, and finding herself trapped by motherhood instead. I could never have put up with that,

thought Luella. Never. I'd have gone nuts. In fact, I'd never have let it happen in the first place.

Well, maybe that's why you're a Slytherin this time around, she heard a small voice responding in the back of her mind.

Luella blinked. This time around? Did that mean she'd lived before? Surely not. And yet she'd heard the others talking about past lives before, so who knew? She brushed the thought out of her mind, and handed the photo back to Penelope.

"Strange how you look just like her, though." the other girl was saying, looking at Luella with eyes that she now realised were the same shade of silvery-blue as her own.
"Maybe you're related somehow. Any Figgs in your family?"

"Your dad asked me the same question. No, I don't think there are. I'm pretty certain there's none on my dad's side and my mum's maiden name's Carroll."

Penelope did not seem too put out by this news. "Hmm. Well then, maybe you're related to my maternal grandmother instead. Does the name Arabella Figg ring any bells?"

"Arabella Figg, Arabella Figg..." Luella thought hard. She didn't recall the name and yet in the back of her mind, it sounded familiar. Then it came to her. "My great aunt's called Arabella. But I don't see her much because Mum doesn't really get on with her. She always was a bit strange - she got selected by this obscure boarding school at age eleven totally out of the blue, went off there, got married to a schoolmate and virtually disappeared after that. Mum and Dad reckon that if she'd lived a hundred years ago she'd have been burned as a witch..." Her voice trailed off. "No way."

"Yes way." grinned Penelope. "I think we just found the missing link here, don't you? Your great aunt Arabella must be my maternal grandmother. So what does that makes us? Second cousins?"

"Something like that, yes." Luella sat back in shock. "My god, why did I never see it before? She's a witch, she must be, that's the only explanation. Wow, that means I'm not the only witch in my family. I'm not a random fluke, the magical genes really were in there all along. Cool!" Indeed. And not just for that reason. The presence of other mages in her ancestral line, and the maternal one at that, made it a lot more plausible that she really was Morgan's Heir, a direct female-line descendant of Salazar Slytherin's daughter. The thought warmed her heart. It made her destiny that bit more natural. She hadn't been chosen at random after all, it was part and parcel of her identity, of her bloodline. It was something she'd been born to do. Mudblood, eh? she thought to herself, grinning as she recalled Draco's reaction to the first attack. Not anymore! Enemies of the Heir beware, indeed! And you, Malfoy, are right up on the list!

She smiled at Penelope, her new-found relative. All through her time at Hogwarts, she'd heard her fellow Slytherins brag about their relatives and felt left out because she couldn't do the same. And now, finally, she had some mage-born kin of her own. Life had never looked better.

Virtually the first thing she did after dinner was track down Caitlin, who was propped up against the mantelpiece in the Lovegoods' front room, talking to Melissa. News this good just had to be shared.

"Caitlin!" she gasped. "Caitlin, guess what?"

"What?" Caitlin smiled indulgently. Several glasses of red wine later, and Caitlin was in a good mood, and consequently far more tolerant than usual of excitable fourteen year olds.

"I might have magical relatives! Isn't that cool?"

"Wonderful, darling. Absolutely fascinating. Unless they're Malfoys. Then I might have to kill you."

Melissa rolled her eyes and summoned her house-elf. "Sukey dear, Caitlin is a little the worse for wear. Be so good as to fetch a glass of Sobriety Potion, and if you can make it look like a glass of Chardonnay, so much the better."

"As you wish, Mrs. Lovegood." Sukey disappeared and a minute later a tray containing what looked deceptively like a glass of red wine appeared, hovering next to Melissa. She took the glass and offered it to Caitlin.

"Another one, Cait?"

"Don't mind if I do." Caitlin took it from her and drank it. Then promptly started coughing and spluttering. "Mel, what on earth is this? Cabernet Sauvignon's not meant to taste like that!"

"Sobriety Potion." said Melissa primly.

"What'd you give me that for?" snapped Caitlin. She looked around, blinking. "Damn. I'm sober. A whole evening's drinking wasted."

"Look on the bright side." Melissa consoled her. "You won't get completely wasted as fast, which means more drinking time for you. Won't that be nice?"

"Not as nice as blissful oblivion in the early hours of the morning. Mel, I'm capable of staying vertical for ages. I've even outdrunk Sirius Black before now, and that's no mean feat."

"Caitlin," Melissa's voice made it clear in no uncertain terms that there were far more important things than Caitlin Tyler's alcohol intake to talk about. "Luella here is trying to tell you something. Why don't the two of you adjourn to a side room for a bit?" She gave Caitlin a meaningful look. Caitlin took the hint.

"Oh, alright then. Come on, Luella. Tell me all about it." She led Luella off into the conservatory.

Luella shivered as the cold air hit her. While it was certainly secluded, and the view of the night sky and the bright lights of Chudley twinkling in the distance was not something Luella had any complaints about, the lack of insulation and central heating was less appealing. Fortunately, Caitlin was no longer protected from the cold by four glasses of wine and some of Leonard Lovegood's cocktails.

"*Ignito!*" A small fire roared into life next to the wicker sofa, evidently enchanted so as to give off plenty of heat and light, but not actually burn anything. Caitlin sat down next to it and motioned for Luella to sit beside her. "Alright then. What's so important?"

"How well do you know the Clearwaters?"

"Well enough. Why?"

Luella took a deep breath. "Because I think I might be related to them. I mean, Patrick said I looked just like his ex-wife, then I got talking to Penelope and she showed me a picture of her mother, and we worked out that her grandmother could be my great aunt. What do you think? Am I related to them? Well? Am I?" Luella could barely contain herself.

Caitlin just looked at her, and smiled. She didn't seem at all surprised. "Of course you are, dear. Did your parents never tell you about your mad old great aunt Arabella?"

"Well, yeah. I even met her a couple of times. But I always hated going round her house, so Mum and Dad stopped taking me. Never knew she was a witch though!"

"Nor do your parents. I'm surprised you didn't guess sooner though. Yes, Luella, you do indeed have mage relatives. Penelope Clearwater's your second cousin. Pleased?"

"I should say so!" Luella leant back, gazing up at the stars, trying to digest this news. "I mean, this makes everything different!" She met Caitlin's gaze again. "It means I'm not a genetic fluke after all. There's been mages in my family all along. I really am descended from Morgan Tal-y-Rhys, aren't I?"

"You're the Second Heir. Of course you are."

"I know. But..." Luella searched for the right words. "This makes it so much more real. This is the first time I've ever really been conscious of having a family history, you know? It's the first time I've ever really felt this whole Heir thing as something that's part of me. Before, I felt like it was something imposed on me from outside. I used to constantly wonder 'why me?' But now it's different. It's like it's part of my heritage, so why not me?"

"Why not indeed." Caitlin was studying Luella intently, something clearly on her mind. "But Luella, it would never have been forced on you in any case, don't you realise that? Don't think of yourself as a hapless pawn in all this - you're not! Morgan wouldn't have pointed a finger at you and intoned 'You shall be my Heir'. She would have approached you in the afterlife and offered you the job. She wouldn't have lied to you or blackmailed you, or anything, just explained what would be involved and

asked. You would have had a choice, Luella. And the right to refuse too. But you didn't exercise it. You agreed. For some insane reason, you actually wanted to do it."

"I did?" A pause. "Why?"

"Only you can say for sure, Luella. However, perhaps if you'd just had a life where you'd felt powerless, at the beck and call of other people, having to put their needs first and sacrifice your own dreams, maybe you'd jump at the chance for a life where you were the centre of attention for a change, where you got the power and the glory for once, where your needs were the most important thing for everyone. Maybe."

The words struck a chord. Luella felt an eerie chill of recognition go running up her spine as the words that had come to her earlier made their presence felt once more. "Maybe that's why you're a Slytherin this time around..."

"Caitlin," she began, "do we really reincarnate?"

"Of course we do, Luella. Well documented fact. It's really quite common for mage children to talk about past lives when they're young. They almost always forget later, of course, but nevertheless, it happens. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think I know who I might have been." Luella took a deep breath before launching into an explanation of her suspicions. The resemblance. The way she'd felt as if she'd known Patrick Clearwater before. The little voice that had whispered that maybe that was why she was now a Slytherin. And strangest of all, the vision she'd had looking into Patrick's eyes, the vision of being murdered by a Death Eater forcing her own husband to perform Avada Kedavra on her, and cursing her killer with her last words.

"I was her, wasn't I? I was Louise Figg."

Caitlin didn't reply. She just gazed at Luella with something like sadness in her eyes, mingled with amazement, presumably at having worked all that out.

"Well? Am I right?" Come on, say something, thought Luella. Tell me I'm not gonig mad...

"You may well be." Caitlin finally spoke. "That vision..." She shivered. "You just described her death pretty much perfectly. I didn't see it happen, she was already dead when I got there, but it tallies with what I was told later."

"You were there?" gasped Luella.

"I was. Got there in time to stop them killing Patrick and Penelope too." She met Luella's gaze, the memory evidently still tormenting her. "But not in time to save Louise. I'm sorry."

Luella realised with a start that Caitlin was actually apologising to her. Apologising for not getting there in time, for letting her die. The thought was unnerving, to say the least.

"Don't be." she said, reaching for Caitlin's hand. "It's not your fault. You couldn't be everywhere. Anyway, between you and me, I think you did her a favour. Apparently she was constantly picked on by her mum, who virtually intimidated her into being a housewife. I'd have hated it. I'm much happier being Luella the Slytherin."

Caitlin sighed happily, smiling with relief. "I'm so glad you said that. I mean, it's what I always thought, but I needed to hear it from you too. Maybe it really was for the best. After all, Penelope doesn't seem to have suffered too badly, and Patrick's dealt with it rather well considering."

"Poor thing. That must be awful, to come out from a curse and realise that you've just killed someone you love without even realising it. No wonder he doesn't like talking about it. Do you think I should tell him I don't blame him?"

"No!" said Caitlin firmly. "No, you should not. I don't want you saying a word of this to any of the Clearwaters. It would only upset them. Maybe one day, when the time is right. But not yet. Promise me, Luella!"

"Alright, alright. I won't say anything. But he just looked so upset when I asked..."

"Well of course he would." Caitlin said patiently. "It's still a sore point even now. Which is why you shouldn't go poking into it. When he is ready to tell you about it, if he is ready to tell you about it, he will do so. And until then, stay out of it!"

"Yes, Caitlin." Luella said, hanging her head in submission. Until something occurred to her. "Caitlin, do you know what happened to the Death Eater who did it? I mean, did the curse work at all?"

Caitlin laughed grimly. "I should say so! Louise Figg was a female-line descendant of Morgan, just like you are. She was a Tal-y-Rhys, and when Tal-y-Rhys witches make curses like that, they invariably happen. It took seven months, but his conscience did indeed return. He also found out just what it was like to see someone he cared about suffer at Voldemort's hands in the process. And you kept your word too. You found him again, except this time around he's going to help you get revenge on Voldemort as a way of making it up to you."

"He is?" Luella asked in confusion. "But I don't know any Death Eaters..." Her voice trailed off as she realised that wasn't strictly true. And the former Death Eater in question fitted Caitlin's description exactly. "Professor Snape? Killed Louise Figg?"

Caitlin nodded. "He did. He's the reason I escaped unscathed. I didn't know it was him, but he recognised me and called off his colleagues. You see, his conscience started reviving there and then."

"My god." Luella whispered. She recalled her vision, and the Death Eater's voice that had sounded so familiar. Of course. It was Snape. How could she not have recognised him? She'd heard him use that exact same tone of voice with the Weasley twins hundreds of times. And she knew he was an ex-Death Eater too. Although there was a world of difference between knowing that and actually seeing him in action. It chilled

her, seeing him being so cold, especially to her. After all, in this life, he'd almost always treated her well. To think that he'd ended her last one...

"Luella?" Caitlin's voice cut through her thoughts. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I mean, no, I mean... Are you sure?"

"Positive." Caitlin was watching her, worried. "Talk to me, Luella. You look horrified."

"Do I? Sorry. It's just so weird knowing that it was him who killed me." Luella shivered.

"I can imagine. Do you hate him?"

"No. No, I don't. But it's going to be weird seeing him again, knowing that. Very weird. I suppose you're going to tell me not to talk to him about it either, aren't you?" Luella sighed.

"However did you guess?" exclaimed Caitlin. "No, I really don't think it would be a good idea to tell him who you were either. But if you want to talk about it in the abstract, you know, just under the guise of telling him about your mage relatives or something, then feel free. I'm sure you're more than capable of getting him on to the subject without giving yourself away." she grinned knowingly.

"No problem." Luella replied, grateful for the tacit permission to broach the subject as long as Snape did not know she was the reincarnation of his victim. After all, she could hardly let this drop now. No wonder she'd been so deeply drawn to him. Her subconscious must have recognised him. However, it was rather disturbing that she was now attracted to the man who'd killed her, but to her former husband, she felt nothing more than mere liking. Still, she supposed that if she'd hated her home life before, it was only reasonable that she didn't want to get involved again.

Snape, on the other hand, she had every intention of cross-examining until he'd told her every single thought and feeling he'd had that night. One way or another, she had to know how he felt, if only to help her deal with the idea. And as soon as she got back to Hogwarts, she was going to find out.

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Chapter Fifteen The Slyth That Turned

All good things must come to an end, and Christmas is no exception. It didn't seem like long before the holidays were over and it was time for school once more.

Not that Luella minded. She'd done all her holiday homework, and it would be nice to be back with her friends again, in an environment where she didn't have to pretend she was normal all the time. Although her parents didn't condemn the idea of magic, Luella could tell that they weren't comfortable with it at all. Which meant she ended up living a rather schizophrenic existence at times, being an ordinary Muggle teenager while simultaneously being the Second Heir and possessor of powers most people could only dream of. No, all in all, Luella couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts, where in Deanna's words, she could get a proper education with her real people. Not for all the world would she be anywhere else now. Certainly not at that comprehensive in her town. To think she'd almost ended up going there.

However, to be fair, there were certain aspects of life at Hogwarts that she could live without. Draco Malfoy. Divination. Being the unsuspecting victim of yet another Weasley prank. Getting suckered into helping Marlie with her homework. And Quidditch.

It was unfortunate then, that Quidditch was the dominant topic of conversation in the Serpents' Nest that night. Quidditch, and the brand new racing brooms that Deanna had acquired from her mother, which the rest of her house were even now cooing over like they were the most amazing thing ever invented. Luella couldn't really see what all the fuss was about, although even she had to admit they did look very nice.

"Nice?" Deanna demanded. "Several thousand Galleons worth of brooms, and all you have to say is that they look nice?"

Luella raised an eyebrow. "Would you rather I said they looked horrible?"

"Don't be facetious. Lu, these are the brooms of champions. They're custom-made for us, they're very fast, they look stunning, they're very valuable and unavailable to anyone else until the summer. They are not nice! They are breathtakingly beautiful works of art!"

Luella inspected them again, just in case she'd missed anything the first time. She hadn't.

"They just look like brooms to me."

The entire house gasped as if she'd said the Mona Lisa was just splodges of paint on a canvas, or the collected works of Beethoven just someone hitting piano keys.

"What?!" screeched Marlie in horror. "Just brooms? Lu, you take that back right now!"

"Luella," Lucas Vetinari told her coldly, looking up from his brand new Firebolt for the first time since he'd got it. "these are not just brooms."

"No," sighed Mike Lovegood, peering over his sister's shoulder, eyes riveted to her Firebolt by sheer, unadulterated envy, "they're Firebolts. Sis, I don't suppose there's any chance...?" His voice trailed off hopefully.

"Forget it." Marlie's crisp tones dashed his hopes immediately. "This broom is customised for precisely my height, weight and build. If you rode it, you'd break it. And no you're not having your own. Reserve team members only."

Mike turned straight to Marcus Flint. "Flinty, there's no easy way to tell you this but..."

"Michael." came the equally uncompromising reply. "You are not handing in your notice and joining the reserves just to get a Firebolt. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Marcus." Mike muttered.

"Glad to hear it." Marcus turned to address the rest of the first team. "And that goes for the rest of you too!"

There were moans of disappointment, but no real complaints. After all, most of them didn't really want to be in the reserves that much.

The attention started to dissolve after that. Once the reserves had been issued with their Firebolts and everyone had had a chance to look at them, the conversation began drifting off towards other topics and the gathering broke up.

Marlie was still transfixed by her Firebolt. "Tyler, you have surpassed yourself this time! I knew they'd be good - a former member of one of the greatest Chaser line-ups Slytherin have ever had would hardly choose anything other than the best - but I had no idea they'd be this good! Deanna, I could kiss you. Your mother is a demi-goddess."

"Don't you start, she already thinks she's Aphrodite Incarnate. But she's certainly come through for us with these." Deanna caressed her Firebolt, gleefully anticipating riding to victory on it. "How can we lose with these? How can we possibly lose? The other teams don't have a chance! Hell, we could give the first team a run for their money on these!"

"Hey now, that's an idea." mused Marlie. "Wonder if Flinty's up for a friendly? I shall have to ask. But enough of this Quidditch talk!"

"Thank the gods." Luella and Rianne said in unison, before turning to each other and grinning. Marlie chose to ignore them.

"Tell me. What else has been happening at Hogwarts while I've been away? What have we missed?" She lowered her voice. "How's Ginny?"

"Much improved." Rianne told her. "Fred and George have decided they no longer have a problem with her being Slyth. In fact, they're rather proud of the fact." She proceeded to tell Marlie and Luella about the snake-in-the-box and the prank on

Malfoy. Both girls fell about laughing in all the right places, and the shrieks when Rianne described Draco's reaction to a paper snake lunging at him were probably audible right up in Gryffindor Tower.

"Perfect. Just perfect." Luella dried her eyes. "Oh man, I wish I'd seen it. Reckon he'll fall for it twice?"

"I doubt it." Rianne responded. "He's not Ron Weasley after all."

"Poor boy." Marlie giggled. "Never mind, I'm sure he's not too badly affected by it all."

"Poor boy, my arse. He deserved it all, Marls." Deanna was reminded suddenly of Draco's little slip-up not long after, when he'd called his cousin Marls. And now here was Marlie almost feeling sorry for him. Very intriguing indeed. However, she didn't get the chance to follow up her curiosity. Marlie had turned the conversation back towards Ginny.

"No doubt. Still, great idea of Fred and George's. I saw them buying it, and they as good as told me it was for Ginny. Nice to see that unlike some, they still think Ginny's a human being." A momentary flash of bitterness before the smile returned. "Ginny's happier then?"

"Oh yes." Deanna confirmed. "Now she's realised that not all her family either hate her or are deeply disappointed in her, you'd be surprised. She's not been depressed at all this holiday. Take a look for yourself."

Marlie turned to look at Ginny, who was even now sitting in a corner with Lydia and Autumn, laughing over some private joke and apparently not possessed of a care in the world. Satisfied, Marlie turned away.

"Ri, Deanna, you two are marvels. She doesn't seem like the same girl."

"Yes, she seemed to perk up on Christmas Day, and stayed that way ever since. It really was quite surprising how quickly it happened. Almost by magic." Rianne said, suddenly appearing very thoughtful.

"Or just good company. Amazing what companionship can accomplish." Deanna was regarding Ginny with a fondness normally reserved for her dorm mates only. "You know, she's a really sweet little kid now she's Slytherined up a bit. Do you know, I think she's finally come to terms with it?"

"Good for her." Marlie's usual levity slipped for the merest of instants, revealing a genuine affection. "Maybe now she'll stand up to Ron and tell him what a divot he's being."

"Divot?" Rianne whispered to Luella, not having heard the term before.

"A golfing term." Luella explained. "Refers to a useless clod of earth that does nothing other than get in the way and generally cause annoyance to all and sundry."

"That sounds about right. Hey, that reminds me." The mention of Ron had brought back memories of the other events of Christmas Day. "Do you know what the Terrible Trio have done now?" She proceeded to tell them about the Polyjuice Potion and the impersonation of Crabbe and Goyle.

Neither Marlie or Luella could believe their ears. "Polyjuice Potion? But that's really advanced magic! Where on earth did they find the recipe for that? Not to mention the ingredients!" Luella's outward disapproval masked a secret jealousy that she'd never thought of anything like that.

"I suspect that the ingredients were courtesy of our very own Professor Snape." Rianne observed. "And it's not impossible for students to gain access to the Restricted Section under false pretences as you two well know." She watched with satisfaction as the two girls squirmed under her gaze.

"Good prank though. Malfoy was suckered good and proper. Damn, I wish I'd thought of it! But there's still time..." Deanna's eyes wandered over to where Malfoy was sitting with Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy, deep in what seemed to be a very indepth conversation that could only involve plotting and mischief. She just hoped it wouldn't involve her.

"Cheeky little so and so's though." Marlie seemed less impressed. "Fancy infiltrating our common room like that! How dare they!"

"Going to get your own back are you?" asked Luella, a note of weariness in her voice. Great, another dubious scheme that she'd no doubt get roped into.

"Too right. If Harry and Ron can sneak in here, then I'm going to bloody well get inside Gryffindor Tower. Somehow."

"Well, leave me out of it if you do. You're on your own, Marls."

Marlie just shrugged. "OK then. I'm sure I'll manage. But I'm going to do it. Oh yes. I am." She stared into space with the air of a fanatic, as her friends exchanged looks of resignation. "I'll get into that common room if it's the last thing I do."

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Marlie was not the only Slytherin lusting after revenge. On the other side of the common room, Draco and friends were also nursing grudges. And unlike Marlie, they'd had the holidays to brood over it. Not even Crabbe and Goyle's new Firebolts had been enough to win them over. Crabbe had flung his down in the corner without giving it a second glance, despite little gasps of horror from Goyle and Draco.

"Crabbe, you can't treat a Firebolt like that!" Goyle protested. "Look at it, it's beautiful."

"It's Tyler's." Crabbe snarled. "I want nothing to do with anything she's had."

"Yeah, but... a Firebolt though!" Goyle hadn't let go of his since Deanna had placed it in his arms and was still stroking it tenderly.

"Crabbe, I know you're not exactly fond of Tyler, but all the same, I hope you're not going to be an idiot about this." Draco told him, with just a hint of sternness. "That is a top of the range broom you have there, and you treat it with respect. And it isn't Tyler's any more. It's yours. So look after it."

Crabbe laughed morosely. "If you think I'm riding it in the reserve matches, you've got another think coming. I'm not doing it! Honestly, it'll be as if I've surrendered. Riding her broom, playing in her team, on her side, doing as she tells me. Well, I'm not giving in, do you hear me? I'm not!"

"Crabbe." Draco's voice was not one to be argued with. "Shut up. And stop being such a prat. You are going to accept that broom. You are going to ride it in the reserve games. And you're **both** going to stop sabotaging the matches. Do you want to ever play first team Quidditch or not?"

Crabbe didn't answer. Draco continued in his frostiest tones. "Well, the best way of doing it is to do well in the reserves. So stop acting like a bloody Gryffindor, letting your emotions getting in the way of your ambitions, and sort your life out. Got it, Crabbe?"

"Yes, Malfoy." Crabbe muttered darkly.

"Good. What about you, Goyle?"

"No worries, boss." Goyle was still staring at his broom as if in a trance. "For a broom like this, I'll do whatever the hell Tyler and Lovegood want."

"Masochist." Pansy teased. Goyle blushed, his head sinking into his shoulders.

Crabbe, however, was still furious. "Goyle, you traitorous git. Forgotten already that she got your brother expelled too?"

"Well, no. But to be fair, he did deserve it." Goyle pointed out.

"That is not the point!" hissed Crabbe. "And since when have you been all virtuous and fair-minded?"

"Since Tyler gave me this Firebolt." Goyle returned his attention to the broom, its sleek design and glimmering surface all the answer that was required.

"Oh yeah? Well what about more recent history? Forgotten about that impersonation of hers? Don't want revenge for that?"

"We don't know it was her for certain." Draco reminded him. "Could have been anyone. Damn, this is frustrating!"

"I still say it was Tyler." Crabbe snarled. "She's exactly the kind of sneaky, backstabbing kid to do something like that. Bet she's been laughing about it all holidays. Her and Stormosi both."

"Don't be silly." snapped Pansy. "She was in the common room at the same time as the impostors. Couldn't have been her."

"Aren't there tales of mages who could appear in two places at once?" Crabbe was refusing to let the idea drop. "She could have mastered that. Or maybe she had accomplices to do the impostoring. Or, right, how about this, her and Stormosi did the impostoring and then got someone else to take their places." He noticed the other three staring at him, Draco and Pansy in outright scepticism, and even Goyle not entirely convinced. "Well, she might have done! She's a Tal-y-Rhys, who knows what they're capable of..."

"Crabbe." Draco's voice was the verbal equivalent of a landslide on the tracks of Crabbe's train of thought. "Not even the Tal-y-Rhys routinely teach their kids bilocation. And don't you think getting someone else to impersonate them is just a bit too risky?"

"They might still have had accomplices though." said Crabbe, stubborn to the last. "I bet it was their idea."

"Maybe. But then again maybe not." Pansy had an odd gleam in her eyes, as if an idea had come to her. "After all, it's not really Tyler's style, is it? She's the kind who likes to rub it in, isn't she? She wants full credit for her escapades. If it had been her, she'd've wanted to be there when you found out so she could enjoy the look on your faces. She prefers more public forms of humiliation."

"Like when she took on Lockhart." Goyle said in admiration. "Now that was a good evening. Man alive, I'd been wanting to give him a good going over for weeks." He noticed the look on Crabbe's face and shut up. Pansy, on the other hand, didn't seem to be bothered by it.

"Exactly, Goyle. I think we're looking at someone a little less sure of themselves here. Someone who's on more equal terms. Someone who doesn't go in for public humiliation but who's not averse to getting back at you three."

Crabbe and Goyle looked blank. Draco, however, was beginning to guess what she was getting at.

"Are we talking individuals in our year, by any chance?"

"We might be."

"Potter. I knew it!" Draco slammed his fist into his hand. "Son of a... Wait until I catch up with him. Him and Weasley, it must have been. With Granger masterminding the whole affair and brewing the Polyjuice Potion. Damn them!" Draco's skin had never exactly been dark, but none of them had ever seen him that

pale before. None of them had seen him literally trembling with rage before. Pansy backed away nervously and even Crabbe and Goyle were wary.

"Draco, calm down!" Pansy hoped she didn't sound as alarmed as she felt. "We'll find a way to get back at them."

"Too right we will!" snarled Draco. "No one does that to Draco Malfoy and gets away with it! Bastards! Just they wait... My god, I bet they're sitting up in the Gryffindor common room right now, which by the way is probably light, airy, decked out with antique furniture and refreshingly free of fibre-optics, laughing at us. Joking about how they fooled Draco Malfoy. Well, they're not going to get away with it! I'm going to get them back if it's the last thing I do!"

"Absolutely, boss." Goyle had learned from long experience that when Draco was in one of these moods, the best course of action was to humour him.

"We'll do all we can." Pansy promised, resting a hand on his arm to calm him.

"Too right, Malfoy. Just one tiny little point. How?"

Draco stopped in his tracks, his turn to be derailed now. "Eh?"

"I said, how are we going to do it?" Crabbe repeated.

Draco stared at him, dumbfounded. Another first. "Erm, well, ah... How are we going to do it, Pansy?"

"Typical, gets all fired up then expects me to do all the work." Pansy retorted. "And I bet I don't get the credit either. Well, let me think." She leaned back in her chair, considering the possibilities. An idea came sneaking into mind. "Say, Drakie, how about we kill two birds with one stone?"

Draco regarded her with curiosity. "Go on. What do you have in mind? And don't call me Drakie."

"Well darling, you know how we're already working on how to get at Tyler by proxy?" Pansy purred.

"Yes." Draco exchanged looks with Crabbe and Goyle, who were as fascinated as he was.

"Well, I was thinking, the same plan might work equally well on Potter."

Goyle stared in confusion. "I don't get it. How does screwing up Tyler's life upset Potter too?"

Crabbe, however, got it straight away. "Goyle, you prat. Think! You manage to get at them both by going for something that links them both."

Goyle appeared none the wiser. It was Draco who had to spell it out.

"Who is Tyler's best mate, Goyle?"

"Lovegood?" Goyle volunteered.

"No. The other one."

"Oh. Mudblood Martin."

"Exactly. Who is also a good friend of Potter and Granger. Now do you see what I'm getting at?"

The Knut finally dropped. "I get it! We go for Martin and that'll sort them both out! Crabbe'll be able to stop going on about how he hates Tyler, and we can all sort out Potter and his mates!"

"Well done, Goyle. And keep your voice down. We don't want everyone knowing."

"Doesn't really help us though." Crabbe interrupted. "We're no nearer to sorting out Martin yet."

"Not yet, no." said Pansy. If the fact worried her, she wasn't showing it. "But we will. We've already got some dirt on her. If we keep our eyes and ears open, more will follow, and if it doesn't, well, we can always fake it. Can't we?" The innocent twinkle in her eyes didn't fool them in the slightest.

Draco hugged her, eyes flashing in triumph. "Pansy, you excel yourself sometimes. Let's do it! You with us, boys?"

"Yeah!" After all, Goyle reflected, it was only Tyler who he had now decided to be loyal to.

"One less Mudblood is fine by me, especially if it's Tyler's mate. Count me in!" laughed Crabbe. The four Slytherins shook hands on the deal, all of them jubilant. If this came off, they'd never have to skulk around Deanna Tyler again...

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By contrast, Ginny was feeling far less jubilant. Over the holidays, with the comforting presence of Deanna and Rianne, she'd not had a care in the world. No more nightmares. No more blackouts. No more voices. It had been almost like the old days, when she'd not had to worry about the dark presence that inhabited her diary hanging over her.

The deceptively harmless little book was currently stashed at the bottom of her trunk, buried under the Lockhart books Harry had given her. After all, it wasn't as if she ever really used them much, and after listening to Rianne's opinions of him all Christmas, it didn't look like she was ever going to. It really was quite surprising how many words there actually were to insinuate that someone was suffering a deficiency in the talent department. Even Deanna had wondered out loud if perhaps Rianne wasn't letting Lockhart get to her a bit. Nevertheless, Ginny had to admit that Rianne did

have a point, and now she wondered if she'd ever be able to take him seriously again. She made a mental note to try not to snort derisively whenever her mother started singing his praises.

Buried under a heap of dust-covered Lockhart books then, with the added protection of them having been Harry Potter's gift, seemed to be the best place for the diary. Certainly it had since lost its influence over her. However, there was also the fact that she'd not actually slept in her dorm since Christmas, having virtually moved in to Deanna and Rianne's dorm over the holidays. The two fourth years exuded an aura of fierce self-confidence that seemed to stop any trouble dead in its tracks, and Ginny couldn't help responding to it in kind, revelling in it as it released her own latent bravery. You could never stay frightened for long in their presence.

Unfortunately, the end of the holidays had brought that particular protection to an end. Deanna and Rianne were now back in their usual gang with Marlie and Luella, and Ginny was back with Lydia and Autumn, who while friendly enough, didn't have that aura of invulnerability that the older Slytherins possessed.

Walking back into her dorm that night, she was made painfully aware of it almost at once. The wave of fury caught her as soon as she walked in, gripping her intestines with a chill grip that stopped her in her tracks and threatened to bring her to her knees.

"What's the matter, Gin?" Autumn asked, noticing her discomfort.

"Nothing." Ginny forced a smile, no mean feat when a wall of pure rage was hemming her in from all sides. "I'm fine."

"You don't look it. Come on, come and sit down." Autumn led her over to her bed, oblivious to the hostility in the air. Ginny forced herself to follow her, almost having to push her way over to the bed. She gritted her teeth as the spirit of the diary howled and shrieked its malice at her, every step a battle for her sanity as her mind threatened to snap under the strain of the fear within. Somehow she made it, collapsing on the bed.

Autumn was staring at her in fright. "Gin, are you OK? You look absolutely terrified."

"My trunk..." Ginny whispered. "Move my trunk to the far corner." All the while, she could hear Tom howling at her, cursing her and all her family. How, how could Autumn not hear it? Ginny could barely hear anything else.

Autumn looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "You what?"

"Move it away from me. As far as possible. Please, Autumn." Ginny pleaded. It took all her strength to get the words out. How, she thought, how am I going to manage to last the night like this? What about the rest of the term? She didn't have to be a psychologist to know that her sanity wouldn't withstand many more onslaughts like this.

Autumn looked extremely dubious, but nevertheless produced her wand. A few charms later, and the trunk was banished to the far side of the dorm. The hatred eased

almost immediately. Slowly, Ginny began to relax a little, the trembling subsiding. She looked down and realised she was covered in sweat.

"Ginny, what on earth was going on there?" Autumn's voice cut through Ginny's train of thought, bringing her straight back to consciousness. "And don't tell me nothing. That was the most major of major freak outs I've ever seen."

Ginny shook her head. "It was nothing. Just me overreacting. I found a dead rat in my trunk over the holidays, and I really hate rats anyway. I just had this horrible thought that there might be another one in there and lost it."

Autumn looked sceptical, but did not question her further. Instead, she got up and walked over to the trunk, kicking it open and giving it a brief search.

"Nothing there, Gin. Just your clothes and books. You're safe."

"Thanks, Autumn." Ginny's relief was genuine, but it was down to the fact that Autumn had believed her more than anything else. "Sorry I worried you."

"Thank you. Will you try not to do it again? Before you start passing your phobias on to me." Checking her own things to make sure there were no rats there, Autumn turned in.

Ginny remained awake for a long time after that. Just because the diary was further away from her didn't mean she couldn't still feel it, although she could deal with it a lot better from that distance. I cannot take much more of this, she thought. Sooner or later, she'd either snap and give in to it once more, or go mad. Neither option was appealing. It seemed her only other choice was to get rid of the diary entirely. But how? Burying it would attract too much attention, and besides, where would she get a spade? There weren't any cliffs she could throw it off, she didn't know how to exorcise demons, and she suspected that burning it would have some rather unpleasant side-effects. Most dark tomes were specifically enchanted to make sure that anyone trying that got more than they bargained for, and Ginny had no intention of taking the risk. Which just left water. Every mage child knew that no magic could last in running water. However, there weren't any rivers, or even a mountain stream anywhere near the school. The nearest river was the River Hogg which flowed through Hogsmeade. It would have done, but first years weren't allowed off the school grounds, and she didn't want to attract attention by asking an older student to drop it in there for her. And the only other significant body of water was the lake. The lake...

Of course! Wasn't it a well-known tradition that the lake was bottomless? At the very least, there were said to be all sorts of underwater channels that came out in the oddest of places. If she could drop it in the lake somehow, all her problems would be solved. But how to make sure it ended up in the lake's very depths without anyone seeing her do it?

Well, the answer to that was obvious. It was well known that the toilets all emptied out into the lake. If she flushed it down one of the toilets, it'd get swept out into the lake straight away and she need never see it again. Problem solved! She had no idea it was that easy. The only thing left to do was to pick a relatively isolated set of toilets

so she'd have some privacy, and the whole thing would soon be a distant nightmare. Turning over, she settled down to sleep, feeling a lot better than she had done in weeks. Rage all you like Tom, she thought, by this time tomorrow you'll be out of my life for good!

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Easier said than done. Tom Riddle had other ideas, and wasn't giving up without a fight. The diary clutched against her chest, Ginny struggled against the invisible wall of hate that pushed her back, trying to shut out Tom's oh-so-seductive blandishments.

You won't get rid of me that easily, Ginny.

Shut up! Ginny thought. I've listened to your lies for far too long! And now I'm doing what I should have done a long time ago - sending you right back to wherever you came from!

Brave, aren't we? You're sounding almost like a Gryffindor there. But you're not one really, are you?

Shut up. Shut up now! Ginny gritted her teeth and steeled herself against him. She was determined not to let him get to her.

We all know what you really are, Ginny Weasley. Slytherin through and through. Just a little Slytherin weasel.

I'm not listening to you! I'm not!

Ginny the Slytherin Weasley. Ginny the Slyth. No good fighting it. No good trying to be brave and virtuous. Not any more. That's for Gryffindors, like that nice Harry Potter and that brother of yours, Ron isn't it?

Don't you even dare mention them! Just stay away from them!

I would if you could. But you can't, can you? Can't stop thinking about them, can you? Can't stop remembering everything your brother's said, can't get rid of the niggling suspicion that maybe, just maybe, he might be right.

That brought Ginny to a halt. Why, oh why, had she confided so many of her secrets to him? He knew all her weaknesses, all her vulnerabilities. All the sore spots that could bring her to her knees in a flash.

Ah yes, that's hit a nerve hasn't it? The possibility that maybe Ron's right about Slytherins, and they are all inherently evil beyond redemption. Well, maybe so. Maybe they are. And if that's so, why fight it? Never forget who laid down the moral codes we all still blindly follow. Gryffindors, Ginny, Gryffindors and their Hufflepuff allies. The winners always make the rules. But if your power lies in opposition to those rules, why follow them? If your nature is antithetical to them, then why sacrifice yourself? Come, Ginny. Join me. I can give you power, power beyond your wildest dreams. You

need never be frightened again. It's your destiny, Ginny, your destiny as a Slytherin, the destiny that ultimately awaits all Slytherins.

All of us?

All of us. Every single one, except of course those too weak or too fearful to embrace it.

It was as if he'd read her mind. Because her question had been inspired by the memory of Deanna Tyler and Rianne Stormosi, and the quiet strength they exuded. Weakness and fear were the last qualities she associated with them. And yet they were both also very, very Slytherin. Then there was Marlie, also the Slytherin's Slytherin, yet as fearless as any Gryffindor, although perhaps shameless was a more accurate way of putting it. And finally Luella Martin, superficially more of a Ravenclaw than a Slytherin, and yet she possessed this undeniable power, a certain attitude that despite, or maybe because of, the surface lovability, you did not cross her lightly. Just because she wasn't obviously plotting something didn't mean she would tolerate interference. With Luella, the impression was of someone who would never dream of betraying you or hurting you, but who also had some very firm goals of her own and a strong sense of her territory and woe betide anyone who transgressed either. Four Slytherins, each different, and yet each true to their house. None lacking in strength of one sort of another. And none even remotely tempted by the dark side.

"You're wrong!" Ginny whispered, knowing suddenly, feeling it in her very bones, that Slytherin did not necessarily mean dark side. That there was a whole seam of Slytherin power lying untapped that could be used for good not just evil. And that the time was right to bring it back into the light once more. "You are so, so wrong!"

For some reason, she imagined Luella again. Luella, kindhearted, friendly. Luella, steely blue eyes and the hint of power lurking beneath. And with that image, a definite reaction from Tom. A violent reaction, but not of hate. At least, not just of hate. One of fear too. Could it be she'd found his weak spot?

She increased the imagery, putting all her willpower into it, making it more aggressive. And now it was not sweet and charming Luella, but cold and ferocious Luella, cloak and hair flying out behind her, eyes blazing, righteous anger driving all before her. The phrase Wrath of God could have been invented to describe her, except it would be Wrath of Goddess in her case, but still.

Get back. Get back now! Tom hissed, but she could tell his authority was crumbling. It was more of a plea than a command.

Ginny began to smile. She was right. He was afraid of her! Tom Riddle afraid of Luella Martin. Who would have thought it? She intensified it even more. And unbidden, saw another image come to mind, that of two snakes entwined around some kind of pole, the same image she'd seen tattooed on Luella's arm in her last nightmare. At the mere sight of it, Tom's composure cracked entirely as his voice dissolved into incoherent screams.

Slowly but surely, Ginny felt the hate begin to give. She opened her eyes and walked on, finding it becoming progressively easier as her will became her own again. As she reached the first floor toilets, the least used girls' toilets in the school, she was almost dancing with joy, Tom's influence over her broken and triumph singing in her veins.

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At that very moment, Luella, eating her breakfast in the Great Hall without a care in the world, felt her Mark start to glow. And with it, her power start to rise and flow out of her, as if in preparation for an attack.

She looked around her. Nothing out of the ordinary. And yet... Someone, somewhere, was using her power, calling on it for help. Needing her assistance. Needing her to help fight... In a flash, she sensed it. The presence of the one individual who she and only she could combat. Her adversary, predestined before her birth. The First Heir, Salazar's Heir. Voldemort.

But only for a second. It wasn't the same presence she'd felt last year, not the same all-encompassing threat. Just a flicker of it, just a shadow of its former self. In fact, it didn't seem to be really here at all. As if Voldemort himself wasn't here, but his influence was. Someone was using his power to carry out the attacks and get into the Chamber, but Voldemort himself wasn't here, might not even be aware of it. How very interesting. And now someone else was calling on her to help fight it, prevent another attack even. Well, how could she refuse?

Concentrating hard, she let the power build up before sending it out, a torrent of divine fury that none would surely be able to resist.

It seemed to work. Within minutes, she felt the presence die away, beaten back, at least for now. Who knows, there might not even be any more attacks now, although Luella wasn't going to start celebrating too soon. However, she was satisfied that there certainly wouldn't be any for the foreseeable future.

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Ginny, of course, didn't know that. All she knew was that she'd finally found a weapon that worked, and that Tom Riddle could never hurt her again. Flinging open a cubicle door, exulting in the sense of victory, she dropped the diary into the toilet bowl and pulled the flush with a triumphant flourish.

"Take that, Tom!" she laughed as he screamed in helpless rage. She could only watch in jubilation as the book disappeared finally, carried away by the running water that no magic could penetrate. And as it did so, its hold over her broke. The last vestiges of fear melted away, and Ginny stood up, shaking herself free, happier than she'd felt for a long time. Free of that particular burden, she walked swiftly away, confident that nothing could surely hurt her now.

Of course, had Ginny seen what had happened after she'd left, she wouldn't have been nearly so sanguine. The torrent of water carried the book down to the lake alright, but once it was in the still water, its power began to return. Gathering its strength, the

book built up enough power to give it momentum, enchanted the lake waters so that they would follow and direct it, then let go, propelling itself back up the now quiet water pipe, back out of the toilet and into the school, flying across the room, hitting the far wall and rebounding onto the floor, followed by a jet of water that flooded not only the toilets but the corridor outside, much to the annoyance of Filch who had to clear it up. However, preoccupied as he was with the corridor, he missed the diary entirely. It was someone else who found that.

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For now though, Ginny believed her troubles to be over. Nothing could hurt her now. Nothing. She took the steps two at a time, making her way to the Great Hall for whatever was left of breakfast.

And ran straight into Ron and Harry.

"Oh!" she gasped, taking a few seconds to register who it was that she'd just collided with. Once she'd realised, the Slytherin composure was up in an instant.

"Ron."

"Ginny." The two of them stared at each other, neither knowing what to say. Harry watched from a distance, deciding that it was best to let them sort it out themselves.

"Are you going to let me past? Only I'm rather hungry and if I don't get to breakfast soon, Deanna and Goyle will have had all the best bits." True enough - those two could eat even Hogwarts out of food given the chance.

Ron just nodded mutely, stepping out of the way to let her by. Ginny walked on, rather glad that was over with. Until Ron called her back.

"Ginny."

She turned. "Yes?"

He struggled to find the words, as if he was being eaten up from within. Finally he blurted it out.

"Are you happy? In Slytherin, I mean."

Ginny blinked. What an odd question. She hadn't thought Ron would give a damn about her feelings. She thought about it for a while. Once upon a time, the answer to that would have been obvious. Three months ago, the answer would have been no, of course not, I miss you all, I'm scared, everyone else thinks I'm a freak, and I'd give anything to be a Gryffindor like you. But now? Now she knew that if she said that, she would be lying. Because the truth was, she wasn't unhappy anymore. Not since Fred and George had given her that snake-in-the-box as a token of acceptance. She was Slytherin. It was her nature. And if Ron didn't like it, tough. He'd just have to deal with it. It wasn't her problem if he couldn't handle it. In fact, she was getting just a little tired of all the pettiness and immaturity.

"Yes. Yes, I'm happy." She drew herself up to her full height, suddenly feeling proud. Very proud. So this was that Slytherin Pride thing that Deanna and Rianne had told her about. She began to see why they'd spoken so highly of it. "Why wouldn't I be? It's a great house."

Ron stared at her. Then the shock wore off. "You what? Great? Slytherin? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing, Ron. Nothing. In fact, I feel healthier now than I've ever done." She stared him down, the sadness and hurt she'd felt when he'd turned against her finally giving way. "Why the hell would I want to be in Gryffindor, Ron? Just tell me that! What kind of life would I have in Gryffindor? Just an ordinary little kid, a good girl, doing what she's told, doing what everyone expects of her. Yet another Weasley, just Percy, Fred, George and Ron's little sister. Do you have any idea how boring that sounds? Do you? Being bracketed with the rest of you, being judged like the rest of you, never being seen as an individual in my own right, but just another Weasley? I would have been dismissed from the start, and never even thought about doing something in my own right. It wasn't until I broke the mould and got put in Slytherin that people starting looking at me, really looking at me, and seeing Ginny instead of the youngest Weasley. It wasn't until I ended up in Slytherin that *I* started seeing myself as something more than the youngest Weasley. Do you understand me, Ron? Getting put in Slytherin isn't the horrible fate you seem to think it is. In fact, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. It isn't a curse. Being in Slytherin has set me free!"

Ron looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Doesn't your family mean anything to you at all?" he yelled at her.

"Of course it does, Ron." Here Ginny narrowed her eyes, ready for the killer line. "I love my family. I would never turn against any of them for being true to themselves. As long as they're not treading on my shoes, I don't mind what they do." She was gratified to see a twinge of guilt in Ron's eyes as her words hit the mark. "But I see no reason to let them stop me from being who I am. And if anyone has a problem with that, well then I'm not sure I want to be related to them anyway. Got that, 'brother'?" She spat the last word at him.

Ron winced. He reached out to touch her arm. "Ginny, wait a second." Ginny brushed him away.

"Get back." It really was absurdly simple, this icy dignity thing. So this was how Rianne managed it. For a moment, she idly wondered what hidden rage Rianne harboured to be so amazingly good at it, but pushed it away. She had more important things to think about. Like teaching Ron a lesson about declaring vendettas against Slytherins. "Listen very carefully Ron. I don't intend to repeat myself. I refuse to let you bully me into feeling guilty about something I didn't have any control over. I'm a Slytherin. I can't change that and I don't really want to. So you'd better learn to accept it, because there's nothing else you can do. Because I am happy as a Slytherin, I like being a Slytherin, and I am *not* going to let your bitterness and immaturity make me feel bad about it. If you can't handle it, then that's your problem and not mine. You don't want me as a sister? OK, fine. The way you're acting, I don't particularly want

you as a brother either. Now if you'll excuse me..." She turned on her heel and flounced into breakfast, head held high, leaving a dumbstruck Ron behind her.

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There was something different about the atmosphere in the Great Hall, she noticed. Something not quite right.

And then she realised what it was. The Hall was silent. With a dawning feeling of horror, she realised that every word of her argument with Ron must have carried in. After all she hadn't bothered keeping her voice down.

A noise started on the Slytherin table. The sound of... applause? Surely not? And yet it was. Marlie Lovegood had got to her feet and started clapping, and one by one, everyone else had followed suit. Soon the entire table was on its feet, cheering and chanting her name. Then Deanna Tyler leaping over the table and running towards her, sweeping her in a hug.

"Ginny, that was unbelievable!" the fourth year yelled. "You go, girl! Man alive, that rocked!"

"Too right it did!" she heard Rianne Stormosi saying. "About time someone put Ron Weasley in his place."

Deanna let her go, and Ginny found herself mobbed by Autumn and Lydia.

"Gin, that was awesome!" Autumn squealed.

"Brilliant." Lydia agreed. "Absolutely brilliant. Autumn and I have been saying for ages how the way Ron's been treating you is a disgrace. About time you stood up to him! Good on you!"

"Very good on you." came a boy's voice. Ginny turned to find herself staring into Draco Malfoy's eyes. However, there was no malice in them. Quite the reverse. He actually seemed rather proud of her. "Thank the gods someone finally stood up for us. Ginny Weasley, can I shake you by the hand?"

Ginny briefly debated the wisdom of doing this. On the one hand she'd been repeatedly told that Malfoy was trouble. But on the other hand, right now he didn't seem a threat. And just think what Ron's reaction would be...

"Alright then." She extended her hand. He shook it warmly before patting her on the shoulder.

"Well done, Ginny Weasley. Oh and welcome to Slytherin, by the way." He let her go and stepped back, still grinning at her. Crabbe and Goyle were next on the scene, also wanting to shake her hand. She obliged. Ron really wasn't going to like this at all, was he?

Finally, she was able to make it to the actual table, where Marlie was waiting, smiling proudly.

"I told him, Marls!" Ginny whispered. "I told him exactly what I thought of him!"

"Yes, you did, didn't you?" Marlie extended a hand and drew Ginny forward, propelling her into a seat and presenting her with a basket of croissants. "Well done, Gin. I'd say you put him in his place good and proper there."

"Thanks Marls." Ginny smiled, overwhelmed by all the attention. "For everything, you know? For helping me settle in. Looking after me. Talking Deanna and Rianne into keeping me company over Christmas. Telling Fred and George to sort themselves out or else. Thanks."

Marlie waved dismissively. "Think nothing of it, Gin. No one treats a fellow Slytherin like that and gets away with it. It was the least I could do. Besides, the twins decided to get reconciled with you on their own. And these two volunteered entirely of their own free will."

"And good fun it was too." Deanna grinned. "I'd do it all again if I could, eh Rianne?"

"Absolutely, teaching young Slytherins the ways of our house never fails to be rewarding. Especially when they learn as fast as our Ginny."

"Stop it Rianne, you're embarrassing the poor girl!" laughed Marlie as Ginny turned away, blushing. Trying to avoid everyone else's gaze, Ginny looked away and came face to face with Luella, who hadn't said anything yet.

They looked into each other's eyes. And Ginny knew in that instant that when she'd invoked Luella that morning against Tom, it hadn't been just her imagination at work. She really had had outside help, and what was more Luella knew it.

"Thank you too." Ginny whispered timidly. Luella might be a nice girl, but she was still a Slytherin, and Ginny knew far better than to think she was harmless.

"No problem." Luella for her part was observing Ginny extremely carefully. However, she didn't make any comment. "How are you feeling now, Ginny? Better?"

Ginny nodded. "Heaps. Thank you!" She looked at Luella, suddenly bursting with questions concerning just how an ordinary fourteen year old Muggle-born could frighten someone as dangerous as Tom and drive him back. But she didn't ask them.

"You're special, aren't you? Different. You could fight off the Heir, couldn't you?"

For the briefest of moments, Ginny thought she saw something flicker in Luella's eyes. But it was soon gone, to be replaced by a charming smile and a dazzling radiance that made Ginny forget all about asking any more questions.

"Maybe." laughed Luella. "But I'd rather not take any chances. Let's not talk about that though. Gin, your brothers seem to want a word with you."

Sure enough, Fred and George were elbowing their way through the crowd, eager to be the next in line to heap admiration on their little sister.

"Gin!" Fred yelled at her, sweeping her into a hug. "That was fantastic! Well done, mate! About time you stood up to him. Getting yelled at is the only language that boy understands."

"Although given that he seems to spend half his life getting Howlers from Mum, it's not really surprising that it's the only tongue he's fluent in. But that's beside the point. Well done, Ginny!" George shook her hand repeatedly before giving her a hug and ruffling her hair in that infuriating way that brothers seem to think is amusing.

"George!" Ginny protested, rearranging her hair.

"Sorry, sis." George smirked at her.

"You will be." Ginny responded tartly. A thought occurred to her. "Don't suppose either of you two know where Ron went, do you?"

"He seems to be keeping something of a low profile at the moment, oddly enough. Slinked off with his tail between his legs." Fred told her.

"Harry was busy telling him he'd brought it on himself and he could hardly expect you to sit back and take it forever, could he?" George added. He leaned forward, as if to impart some deadly secret. "Between you and me," he hissed in a stage whisper, "I think Harry rather likes you."

Ginny immediately blushed and squirmed as her housemates started laughing. "He does not!" She shot her brothers a glance. "Does he?"

"Ooh! Ginny fancies Harry, Ginny fancies Harry!" The twins started chanting and dancing around her.

Ginny went from scarlet to vermillion. "Cut it out! I do not fancy Harry Potter!"

"Much." Lydia added, diving out of the way before Ginny could get at her.

Ginny got to her feet, mustering her dignity. "I think that it is high time this discussion came to an end. Now I have to see Professor Snape about an essay. If you'll excuse me..." She headed for the door.

Fred turned to George, rubbing his eyes. "Did she just say she actually wants to see Snape outside of lessons? And on a Saturday too?"

George patted his brother's arm, leading him back to the Gryffindor table. "She's a Slytherin, Fred. You have to remember that they actually like him."

"Freaks. Mind you, I don't suppose it hurts what with all the points he gives them." He turned to his brother, inspired. "Say George, if we put a sign over the door to Snape's

classroom reading 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here', do you reckon he'd kill us?"

"Probably. That's if he caught us anyway."

"We'd have to get DT and Marls to lend us their brooms so we could make a quick getaway."

"Or we could just use Ginny as a human shield."

"George! That's cruel. We'll use Percy instead. Or better, Ron."

"Fred, the whole point of having a human shield is that it has to be someone Snape won't want to hurt."

"You're not making this easy for us, are you George?"

Ginny chuckled to herself as she left them to it. Typical Fred and George, always up to something. She just hoped it didn't get traced back to them, although she had her doubts. Snape was notorious for being able to accurately trace suspects, and even when he had no evidence whatsoever to go on, he had a nasty habit of guessing. He might be her House Head, but Ginny was very glad she'd never been on the wrong side of him.

Which is why she nearly jumped out of her skin with fright when she realised she was being followed. Particularly when she turned round and saw who it was. Professor Snape.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Weasley." he said, noticing her discomfiture with a wry grin. "I'm not trying to catch you out."

"Thank you, sir." she stammered. For all her fondness for Potions lessons, being this close to Professor Snape in the flesh was still a little unnerving.

"No need to thank me. In fact, I believe I should be thanking you. Your little defence of Slytherin this morning has worked wonders for our House's reputation. It was not just Slytherins applauding you, you know. I saw Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs cheering too. Even the Gryffindors seemed to agree with you on some points. Your brothers certainly seemed happy enough."

"Well, Fred and George are like that. They've always thought Ron was overreacting. And they're right." Ginny was surprised by her own vehemence. Snape seemed a little surprised, although not displeased.

"For once I agree with them. Your brother's treatment of you has been nothing less than shameful. Miss Tyler has told me a little of what went on, although she also said not to approach you directly as she thought it might embarrass you. However, rest assured I have been watching the situation carefully."

"Oh! You knew? I mean, Deanna told you?"

"Oh yes. Apparently she had a crisis meeting with her room mates the very first night of term and they immediately developed a plan to protect you and help you settle in. I am gratified to see that it worked."

"It did." Ginny nodded. She looked at him, her curiosity piqued. "Is that why you've been so nice to me? Because Deanna asked you to?"

"Partly. But I was already taking an interest. You said it yourself this morning. Had you been a Gryffindor, you would have been just another Weasley. But as a Slytherin, you attracted the attention of the entire school in your own right without even trying. Myself included. As a Gryffindor, I wouldn't have looked twice at you. Now you can congratulate yourself on being the first Weasley I've ever actually liked."

Ginny was speechless. Praise indeed. She never thought she'd see the day when Snape actually admitted to liking a Weasley. Fred and George would never believe their ears.

"Thank you!" she whispered. She found herself smiling suddenly. "It's true, isn't it? I'd have been nothing in any other house, would I?"

"Only you can answer that, Miss Weasley." However, the teacherly impartiality did not appear to go much more than skin-deep.

Ginny paid no attention, lost in her own train of thought. "You know, that's why the Hat put me here. I was so sick of being looked down on and being dismissed as only a Weasley, that I told the Hat to put me somewhere I could be seen in my own right and be special. Somewhere I could shine. And it made me a Slytherin."

"It did. Do you regret it?" The usual cool disinterest had disappeared. He was watching her intently. However, she was not frightened any more. Quite the reverse.

"Not in the slightest! I love it!"

"I'm very glad to hear it. Although it didn't seem that way the night of the Sorting."

"It wasn't." Ginny looked back in wonder at how she'd felt then. She couldn't even remember it clearly, much less comprehend the sea of emotions she'd been set adrift on that night. "All I remember is walking over to the Slytherin table in shock and getting cuddled by Marlie."

"And now look at you." Snape was regarding her with an emotion she'd never seen on him before, and which was not unpleasant to behold. Pride. "Every inch the Slytherin. Hard to believe you're the same girl. Certainly when your brother was around you never walked like that. Always you walked like a victim, as if afraid he'd turn on you. Don't think no one noticed. We all did. Had you not been brother and sister, Professor McGonagall and I would have intervened, but as it was, the Headmaster seemed to think it was better if we let you sort it out yourselves. I did have my doubts, but it seems to have paid off. I don't know what Miss Tyler and her friends did, but whatever it was, it worked. You are truly a Slytherin now. Take twenty points."

"Twenty?? Are you serious?" She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Fred and George were going to hit the roof when they heard about this.

"Perfectly serious. It's always nice to see a previously downtrodden Slytherin start realising their power. Last year it was Luella Martin, and it didn't feel at all bad seeing that either."

Ginny recalled Luella's image driving Tom Riddle away, and the sense that Luella Martin was a lot more powerful than she looked.

"Sir," she asked tentatively, "what happened to Luella? I mean, she's just a kid and yet there's something about her..." Her voice trailed off.

Snape didn't answer immediately. When he did, his voice was quiet and far away, as if it was something he didn't want to speak of.

"In the fullness of time, you will know everything. But until then, I rather think it's Miss Martin's business and hers alone. You will have to ask her. In fact, you can do so right now. Here she is."

Ginny turned, and blushed when she saw Luella strolling down the corridor towards them, at ease and confident. She rather hoped the older Slytherin hadn't heard her ask Snape that particular question. If you were so reckless as to pry into a Slytherin's secrets, the last thing you wanted was for them to find out.

She needn't have worried. Luella sauntered up as if she hadn't a care in the world.

"Morning, Gin. Morning, Professor. Hey sir, were you at breakfast this morning? Did you hear Ginny having a go at Ron? Wasn't it great?"

"It was certainly entertaining. I was just congratulating Miss Weasley on her performance. Worthy of a true Slytherin."

"I got given twenty points." Ginny told her proudly.

"Nice one!" Luella seemed impressed. "Is it really that easy? I'd better go track Ron down, if all I have to do to get twenty points is have a go at him."

"Miss Martin, it is not that easy, as you yourself well know from last year."

Here a shadow crossed over Luella's face. "No. No, it wasn't." She shuddered, an involuntary gesture that sent a reciprocal stab of fear through Ginny as well. Fear accompanied by a memory of Tom Riddle's venomous red eyes...

She brushed the memory away. Riddle was gone, gone for good. She was a true Slytherin now, and nothing could hurt her. She looked up and found herself looking straight into Luella's eyes. And suddenly felt the urge to head off to the library and do some study. Unaware that the impulse came from anywhere but her own mind, she gathered her things and prepared to leave.

"I've just realised, I've got a whole heap of homework to do. No good getting twenty points for Slytherin if I go and lose them all by not handing homework in on time, is it?"

"Very true, Miss Weasley. If only the rest of my students were so assiduous in their studies." Snape sighed, with an air of melancholy that said all too clearly that he had very little hope of it ever happening. "Never mind, sir." Ginny said cheerily. "At least you've got me and Lu to keep your faith in humanity alive. See you both." And with that, she was gone.

Luella waited until Ginny had turned the corner before addressing Snape with an urgency she'd kept well hidden up until that point.

"Sir, I need to talk to you. It's important."

Snape's good mood evaporated, although he was self-possessed enough to conceal any anxiety he might be feeling.

"Alright. We'll go to my office. Come."

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It was with mixed feelings that Severus showed Luella into his office. On the one hand, Luella didn't seem frightened, so that was one thing off his mind. On the other, Luella demanding to talk to him with such urgency did not bode well.

"So. What's so important that you had to use Glamoury to get rid of Miss Weasley so quickly? And don't deny it. I can tell when you're using it even if she can't."

If Luella felt guilty, she didn't show it.

"Hey, I had to. I could hardly talk about the girl while she was right in front of me, could I?"

This got his attention. Of all the topics he'd imagined Luella wanting to talk to him about, he hadn't thought Ginny Weasley would be one of them.

"What about Miss Weasley?"

"I think she might have been attacked this morning. Or threatened with it."

"Attacked?" Severus couldn't believe what he was hearing. "But she's absolutely fine, how could she have been?"

"I don't know." Luella replied, troubled. "But this morning, I felt the Mark glowing, and power going out of me. And I felt him. Voldemort."

"What?!" And there he'd been, thinking things couldn't have got any stranger. "Voldemort? Luella, are you alright?" The effort of fighting Voldemort last year had nearly killed her. He had no wish to go through all that again.

"I'm fine." Luella reassured him with a smile that told him she guessed what he was thinking. "It wasn't like last year. It was more like some kind of echo of him, as if he's left some part of himself here and it was that I was picking up on."

"Someone's using his power, but he himself is not here?" Severus was beginning to have an extremely bad feeling about this. The famous Snape intuition that had resulted in so many students who thought they'd covered their tracks perfectly getting caught out was now hammering at the back of his brain, insisting that there was something he ought to remember, something important. But it was tantalisingly out of his reach.

"That's it." Luella nodded. "That's it exactly! I couldn't tell who it was though."

"Unfortunate." Severus was surprised at how well he'd concealed his frustration. "But what does Miss Weasley have to do with this?"

"I think it might have been her using my power, in fact I'm sure of it. Especially when I saw her in the Great Hall. Granted, it could have just been the flush of victory, but there was something more there. She had this aura of power around her which just seemed a bit too similar to Glamoury for my liking. I don't know for sure, but I just have this feeling that it was her who called on me. That someone tried to attack her and she thought of me and, well, she was able to use my power to fight them off. That's my theory anyhow." Luella sat back, awaiting his opinion.

"Interesting. Very interesting." It did make sense. And it certainly explained why Ginny wanted to know why Luella was special all of a sudden. But on the other hand, there was something about it that didn't quite ring true. "But why was Ginny able to fend off an attack when the other victims couldn't?"

"Because Ginny knows me. Maybe she had an intuition that I was more than I seemed beforehand. After all, she lives in the same common room I do, she hangs around with Slytherins, she spent the holidays with Deanna and Rianne. She's had a lot more opportunity than the others to find out about me. OK, so she doesn't know the truth, but most Slytherins will tell you that I'm not to be messed with. Ginny must have picked up on that."

"Maybe." mused Severus. "But why, when faced with attack, did she think of you? She probably wouldn't have had time to do much. Why was your image the first thing that sprang to mind? She's closer to Deanna and Miss Lovegood, isn't she?"

"Maybe she thought of all of us. Then found that thinking of me in particular helped fight off her attacker."

Severus still wasn't convinced. "There's just a few too many maybes there for my liking. We need to talk to Miss Weasley, find out what really happened before we can know for sure. Can you do that, Luella? She'll probably respond better to you than to me, and besides you have Glamoury to help you along."

"I'll give it my best shot." Luella promised.

"Excellent. Now, was there anything else you wanted to talk to me about?"

"Actually there was." A very strange look indeed materialised on Luella's face, a look of intense curiosity backed up with a disturbing element of hunger. "Professor, did you ever know a witch called Louise Figg-Clearwater?"

In one instant, Severus Snape felt his reality crumble before him. His life as Potions master and Head of Slytherin vanished away, as the events of fifteen years ago came rushing into the present. Suddenly, it was 1977 again and he was a young Death Eater raiding the home of top Auror Patrick Clearwater, Narcissa Harker and Kurt Rosier beside him, eager to avenge the death of Kurt's older brother Evan at Clearwater's hands. A raid which started off routine and nearly ended in disaster when Caitlin Tyler put in an unexpected appearance. The raid which had first led him to question his previously unswerving loyalty to Lord Voldemort, although if he was really honest about it, it wasn't the cause that had attracted him, but the opportunities. A raid which had left him haunted by a pair of cold, silver-blue eyes and the chilling promise that this victim would be back.

"Where did you hear that name?" he hissed at Luella, who, he realised, had eyes exactly the same colour as the witch she was asking about.

"She was my mother's cousin. Her mother, my great-aunt, was a Muggle-born witch. I never knew until this Christmas. Now I'm trying to find out about her."

Severus drew himself a mental family tree. He felt his blood run cold as the implications of it hit him. Louise Figg-Clearwater was a matrilineal relative of the Slytherin Redeemer, the family connections entirely through the female line. Which could only mean one thing. Tal-y-Rhys. He'd been cursed by the dying words of a Tal-y-Rhys witch with nothing left to lose and no reason to pull her punches. No wonder. No wonder his life since then had slowly disintegrated as he'd lost friends, his home, his career, his reputation and any chance of love.

"Why are you asking me?" he whispered. Don't, he silently implored her. Don't ask me this. You don't need to know I murdered a relative of yours.

Too late. He had a sinking feeling that the uncompromising look in Luella's eyes was telling him that she already knew exactly that. However, if he could avoid telling her, then he would.

"She was killed by Death Eaters." Luella leaned forward, resting her hands in his desk. Now that he knew about the relation, it was obvious. She looked just like her late Ravenclaw cousin, except with a self-assurance and power that the other witch had never possessed. At least, not until those final moments when something in her had snapped and Severus had begun to realise that maybe he'd underestimated her. "Were you one of them?"

The very bluntness of the question threw him completely offguard. He wasn't used to dealing with such directness. Slytherins typically preferred the opposite approach of edging the topic of conversation gradually round to the one they wanted to talk about then try and trap their opponent into letting slip the information they were after.

Luella had evidently been spending too much time around Gryffindors, learning their methods and giving them a Slytherin twist.

"Luella, I really don't think you need to know -"

"The truth, Professor." Luella's voice cut him dead, and the merest flicker of Glamoury in her eyes ended any argument on the subject. He might as well tell her while he still had some control over events.

"Alright. Alright, yes, damn you, I killed her. Satisfied?"

She didn't appear shocked. Either she was more self-controlled than he'd thought or his earlier guess had been right. She did know.

However, she clearly hadn't got her pound of flesh yet. "Not yet. How?"

Now here was a dilemma. He hated lying to her, and yet this wasn't the sort of thing you could just let slip. If she knew just what he was capable of...

"Luella, please, don't ask me that. You don't need to know that. Please, don't make me tell you."

"Professor. Tell me!" She snarled the last two words at him, a verbal slap in the face that, even without added Glamoury, would have had him giving in. Then, more terrible than that, fury gave way to a desperate pleading that melted his last defences. "Please. Please, Professor, I need to know, I need to know what happened, I need to know why." Her voice died to a whisper. "I need to know. Please. I mean, you knew her, even if it was only for a little while. You saw her, you spoke to her, what did she say? What was she thinking? What was she like?"

Severus reached out and took her hand. What to say to her? What the hell did you say in this sort of situation? And yet Luella's eyes demanded some kind of answer.

"Luella. Oh, Luella. I don't know if you'll like this. And I have no idea if it'll give you what you're looking for. But I'll tell you what I can. May the gods forgive me." He looked down, unwilling to bear Luella's eyes on him any more. "It wasn't personal. Not for me, anyway, although some of my colleagues had other ideas. You see, Louise Figg-Clearwater had the bad luck to be married to a Muggle-born Auror. One who'd captured and in some cases killed Death Eaters. Including the brother of one of my companions that night. I'll spare you the details of what we did. But I will confess how she died. I placed her husband under the Imperius Curse and made him do it." He forced himself to look at her again, trying to see how she'd reacted. To his surprise, she seemed to be taking it rather well. She'd lowered her eyes, but she didn't seem shocked or surprised, confirming his suspicions that she already knew the bare facts.

"Go on." she whispered. "What happened?"

"If it's any consolation, she died well. She didn't beg for mercy, cry, or anything like that. She died with strength and with dignity. Like a true Tal-y-Rhys. Her death was the first I'd caused that gave me no pleasure. She had power, Luella. Power, like all

your line have. I knew, even as I looked into her eyes, that I had no power over her and never would have. Even killing her wouldn't change that. Maybe that's why I did it so quickly. Couldn't bear feeling inferior. Didn't make any difference. I still dream that her eyes are watching me. I still can't get her last words out of my head."

"What were they?" Luella whispered, enthralled.

"By the power of the Most High Gods, may your conscience wake from the coma you've beaten it into and never cease to torment you until you've paid for what you've done. And may you too know what it's like to see someone you love suffer like this. And this also I promise - in my next life, I'll find you." Severus laughed. "And it happened. Every word. My conscience woke that very night. It started tormenting me, and it didn't stop until Caitlin finally settled the score. Until you healed me." He looked at her again. So like Louise. Too like her. And born a year after her death. A thought began to occur to him. "The only promise of hers that hasn't come true is the last part. She hasn't found me yet."

He studied Luella's reaction carefully. Just as he thought. He'd seen a twinge of guilt before all emotion had been ruthlessly wiped clean from the girl's face. There was far more to this curiosity of Luella's than a simple desire to find out about her family. Far more.

"Melissa tells me you met Patrick Clearwater over the holidays." he said, trying to stay as neutral as possible. "What did you think of him? Did you get on?"

"He seemed like a nice enough man." Luella's composure remained intact, held together by a determination not to give anything away. However, it didn't seem quite as solid as it had done. He was right, she was hiding something.

"You liked him then. Tell me, Luella, was that all you felt? Didn't feel as if you'd known him before?"

"No." He could tell she was lying.

"Didn't feel attracted to him in any way?"

"No!" Luella yelled, leaping to her feet, scarlet with rage. "Sir, do you mind telling me just what the hell you're getting at?"

"Luella, do you believe in reincarnation?"

That stopped her. The colour drained out of her face.

"I don't know." she whispered. "Caitlin tells me mages reincarnate, but I don't know if it really happens."

"You do. You do, or else you wouldn't be here. Out with it, Luella. Why are you really here today?"

Luella gazed back at him miserably, clearly torn between confessing or keeping quiet. The tables were well and truly turned. Finally, she sunk back into her seat.

"Alright, yes. I had a vision of Louise's death, from her point of view. I think I'm her come back."

Severus had thought he'd been prepared for the admission. He was wrong. He'd been completely unprepared for the guilt and horror that was now threatening to overwhelm him. He buried his head in his hands.

"Gods. Oh gods. Luella, I..." He finally dared to meet her eyes. "Luella, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Can you ever... I mean, will you ever forgive me?"

She didn't seem to have heard him. She was just staring at him, shocked, pale, trembling.

"Oh god." she whispered. "Oh god, I should never have told you. I shouldn't have said anything. I'd better go." She got up and moved hastily for the door.

"Luella, wait." Severus was after her in a second. As she reached for the door handle, he caught hold of her by the wrist and spun her round to face him. She didn't resist, just stared back at him in terror. It didn't help his own feelings. Dear gods, he thought, does she think I'm going to repeat myself?

"Luella, it's alright." He pulled her into his arms, soothing her as best he could. "It's alright. You're safe, I won't hurt you."

"I'm sorry." she sobbed. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have said anything, Caitlin made me promise not to tell you that, I'm really sorry." Her fear seemed to have abated, as she was now burying her face in his robes, crying openly.

"You've got nothing to apologise for." he told her, leading her back to her seat, pulling up another chair so he could sit beside her. "Nothing at all. It's me who should be apologising."

Luella sank back into her chair. "I know, but I didn't want to hurt you. I knew you'd feel guilty and I didn't want you to. Didn't want to upset you."

"Never mind my feelings." Severus replied brusquely. "I'm far more worried about yours. Can you ever forgive me?"

"Of course I can." Luella dried her eyes, and finally allowed herself a smile. "Did you ever know her mother? Arabella Figg."

"Not personally, but the entire common room got regular updates on her from Louise's Slytherin sister. Is the old battleaxe still alive?"

"She is." Luella giggled.

"My apologies. Do you see much of her?"

"Not really. Mum and Dad used to take me to see her as a kid, but I was always terrified of her. Used to have nightmares about her chasing after me, trying to turn me into something or chop me up for use in a potion. Now I know why. Past-life memories."

Severus nodded, beginning to understand. "She always did treat her daughters as extensions of herself. I suppose all parents do that to a certain extent, but she was the worst I've ever seen. Diana fought her every step of the way, but I seem to remember Louise never quite having the courage."

"She didn't. She wanted to fight her, but could never bring herself to do it. So she sacrificed her own dreams to look after her mother, she got married, she became a housewife and hated every minute of it. Never even realised her own power until the last few minutes of her life." She gazed straight into Severus's eyes. "Until you made her angry and desperate enough to actually use it. Angry enough to decide in the afterlife that when she came back, she'd never be that weak and submissive again. To agree wholeheartedly when Morgan Tal-y-Rhys made her an offer she couldn't refuse. Without you, I'd still be a downtrodden little housewife, at her mother's beck and call, probably on my way to either a divorce or a nervous breakdown. Or both." She smiled at him. "Thank you."

"You're grateful?" This certainly wasn't the response he'd expected.

"I wouldn't say that. But I wouldn't be Luella Martin the Slytherin Redeemer without you, and I rather like being Luella. So let's just say I don't bear any grudges, I'm not out for vengeance and you don't need to apologise."

Severus still couldn't quite believe it. "Luella, are you sure?"

"Perfectly." A mischievous smile that was pure Slytherin flickered across her face.
"Do you want me to exact a terrifying vengeance?"

"Not especially. I've already had one from Caitlin. That was quite enough." He shivered at the memory before swiftly pushing it away. "Luella, I... Thank you. For not hating me."

"No trouble." Again the mischievous smile. "After all, I only said I'd come after you. I never said what I'd do when I found you."

"Very true." However, pleased as he was that Luella wasn't too traumatised, he still owed her. "Luella, is there anything I can do for you? You know, to make it up to you? Anything at all. I feel I owe you something. Although I feel bound to point out that increasing the Potions grade of any student beyond that which their work merits is not an option."

"There is one thing." Luella faltered, confidence turning to hesitancy.

"Name it."

"Will you help me? Redeem Slytherin, I mean."

Severus blinked. Was that all she wanted? "Luella, you already know I will."

"Well, yes. But that's not the point. You're doing it because Mrs. Lovegood told you to. Or because Professor Dumbledore put you in charge of Slytherin, so you feel it's your job. I don't want you to do it because it's your duty. I want you to do it because you want to. Because..." she hesitated, "because you care about me."

And there he'd been thinking it would be something virtually impossible or shameful. Once more, he pulled her close to him. She gave in almost at once, nestling against him in a way that was comforting and yet mildly disturbing.

"Luella. You don't need to ask. I do care about you. I am not doing this purely because Melissa told me to. Not any more, anyway. If Melissa owled me tomorrow and told me she was taking me off the case, I would still continue to take an interest. I would still be there for you. If Dumbledore put someone else in charge of Slytherin or sacked me altogether, I would still keep in touch with you. Why? Precisely because you are special in your own right, and not just because of your title. Too much has happened, far too much, for me to see you as just one more duty. Worry no more, I'll do what you ask and more if I have to."

Luella smiled, hugged him and sat up, breaking the embrace. "Thanks. It means a lot to me." Something else seemed to occur to her. "Sir, you said Louise had a sister. Is she still alive?"

Severus shook his head. "No. She too was killed by Death Eaters, although before I joined them. She was an Auror, and a Slytherin. She was a Chaser on the Quidditch team, and a good one too. Caitlin knows her better than I did; the two of them were very close. I remember Caitlin was devastated when she died. That's where Deanna got her name from, I believe. Diana Figg was a popular girl. We all missed her. Love her or hate her, she made life interesting. She certainly was a character. I think you would have liked her."

"I think so." Luella started to grin. "Diana, did you say her name was?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Just that I don't think I'm the only Figg girl to have reincarnated as a fourteen year old Slytherin."

It dawned on Severus who she was talking about. "You don't mean..."

"I do. She sounds just like her younger namesake. Diana was an Auror, Deanna wants to be one more than anything, and she's certainly got the talent to do it. She's born within a month of me, as if she wanted to be around at the same time as her sister and help her out. The two of us have always got on, always. Deanna's not generally given to taking an instant liking to people, but she took one to me. She's a Quidditch Chaser too, and a good one. My god, we really were sisters. Amazing!" Luella laughed, throwing her head back in delight.

"Deanna Tyler was Diana Figg. My god." Now that he thought of it, it was the only reasonable conclusion. The two were so similar in personality, he was amazed he'd never noticed it before. "Does Caitlin have any idea what she's given birth to?"

"I wouldn't worry." Luella reassured him. "You said Diana and Caitlin were friends. And Deanna's always got on well with her mother. Caitlin'll be fine."

"You and I on the other hand are doomed. Luella, if you do decide to tell her about who you both were, I'd much rather you didn't mention me."

"Don't worry. She won't know a thing. Tell you what though, I hope she never meets my great-aunt."

"Now that would be an interesting confrontation. Although one best watched from a nice safe distance."

"Like through a crystal ball on the other side of the country."

"My thoughts exactly."

"We'd better make sure they never meet then." Luella got up, brisk all of a sudden.
"Right. I'm going off to find her. Bet she'll love to hear this."

"No doubt. Just remember your promise, Luella. Not a word about me."

Luella promised not to tell her, and with that, raced off to find her friend. Severus watched her go, and sat back, relaxing in a sudden rush of euphoria. For fifteen long years, he'd been haunted by Louise Figg's dying words. For fifteen years they'd followed him around, kicking his conscience into life, there at the back of his mind when he'd been forced to hurt Caitlin, with him every day, reminding him of what he'd done and never been punished for. He'd tried punishing himself, retreating to Hogwarts, shunning companionship and everything that made life worth living, but it hadn't worked. Nothing short of Sleeping Potion had made the nightmares go away. Not until Caitlin had attacked him in turn had they started to abate, and it wasn't until today that he'd really started to feel worthy of living again. Luella didn't bear any grudges. And he no longer felt indebted to Caitlin. Maybe, just maybe, there was hope for him.

Of course, there was just one little thing that stood between him and living again. Namely, the witch who Luella had just rushed off to find. If Deanna Tyler ever found out about his past, he very much doubted she'd be quite so charitable as her friend. As far as Luella was concerned, he'd done her a favour, allowing her to exchange a life she'd hated for one she actually liked. From Deanna's point of view, he'd ruined her life and her mother's. The chances of her ever forgiving him were slim, to say the least. His best hope was that she never knew, and yet until she'd forgiven him too, he had a feeling he'd never be able to put his past behind him.

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Chapter Sixteen Uncoiled By Their Rivals

Luella raced out of Snape's office, mind whirling and emotions running wild, the excitement of this new revelation combining with the aftermath of the encounter just gone to send her into a manic high. Deanna used to be my sister! Cool! Intruding into that thought, however, was the memory of being so close to Snape, the fabric of his robes against her skin, the warmth of his arms around her, hearing his heartbeat right next to her ear. The mere thought of it caused her knees to buckle, the hormonal rush threatening to overwhelm her. She stopped walking, leaning against the wall, savouring the memory while she was still alone.

He'd said he cared about her. He'd held her. Not once but twice. Once again, the boundaries had blurred, and they'd been drawn into that familiar intimacy that terrified as it thrilled. An intimacy she couldn't resist, one that demanded no less than her very heart and soul. What she wouldn't give for more of that! And not just the intimacy. She knew she couldn't resist him, but there was also the satisfaction of knowing that in a way, she had an equal amount of power over him. The look of horror and guilt on his face when she'd blurted out the secret she'd not meant to reveal had told its own story. Yes, she'd felt awful, even scared, at the time. For the briefest of moments, as he'd snatched her wrist and spun her around, staring into her eyes, she'd relived the moment of Louise's death all over again. But the moment of panic had faded as he'd drawn her into his arms, laying any fears she may have had to rest. She was cared for, she was loved, she was safe. Safe forever, as long as he was with her. He'd never hurt her, never let any harm come to her. She was sure of that now. Sure that he couldn't stay impersonal for long where she was concerned, no more than he could with Deanna. Sure that she had power of a kind over him, the power to bring him running to her side at the merest hint of danger. Snape hadn't seen it, but even as he'd held her, told her she was special in her own right, a small smile of triumph had crossed her features. To have that power over someone, especially a grown man... Ecstasy! She resisted the urge to dance in the corridor. But she couldn't resist the urge to wrap her arms round herself with joy and smile blissfully. Then, with added spring in her step, she made her way down the corridor towards the main part of the school.

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She had not gone far when she heard a voice calling her name. Looking up, she saw a boy in Gryffindor colours running towards her. Harry.

"Lu, there you are!" he panted as he raced up to her. "I've been looking for you all over!"

"Have you?" Luella's current euphoria was too powerful to be ruthlessly swept aside as was usually the case, which meant that the first clear view Harry got of her was her beaming with happiness, looking as if her every dream had just come true. Which, Luella realised, probably explained why Harry had taken one look, blinked and immediately started blushing. Decisions, decisions. What's a Slytherin to do? Turn on the seductive wiles and make him even more nervous, or try and reassure the poor boy? In the end, Luella's sense of charity won out. One Glamour later, and the happiness had been turned down enough for Harry to regain his composure.

"Are you OK there, Harry? You look a bit... bewildered."

"Erm, yeah, yeah, I'm fine." he stammered. "Um, Lu, are you alright? I mean, it's just that you look really, er... Different."

"Different how?" Luella purred. Well, OK, maybe she couldn't resist teasing just a little.

"Just... I mean... you look nice." Harry finished lamely.

"Why, thank you!" Luella smiled. "Very sweet of you to notice, Harry. Was there something you wanted to tell me?"

"Yes, no, erm, maybe." Harry fidgeted on the spot, racking his brains as if to remember exactly what he'd wanted to ask her. "Did you hear about Ginny and Ron?" he said, as if to change the subject.

"Hear about it? Harry, the whole school heard about it. Ginny wasn't exactly keeping her voice down, was she?"

"Well, no." Harry admitted. "But what's your take on it? I mean, do you think Ginny was a bit hard on him?"

"Hard on him? Well, I suppose she was. However, sometimes that's exactly what's needed." Luella narrowed her eyes, daring him to disagree. "Are you seriously telling me Ron didn't completely overreact? Personally, I think it's wonderful that Ginny's finally stood up for herself. She seems a lot happier."

A look of relief settled on Harry's face. "I'm so glad you think so, Lu! That was what I was thinking too, although I couldn't say that to Ron obviously. I told Hermione what happened though, and she reckoned Ron's had it coming for weeks."

"Smart girl." Luella fell into step alongside Harry as the two of them headed out of the dungeons and back into the upper floors. "That's pretty much the consensus here too."

"There's a surprise." Harry grinned. "Is the party underway yet?"

"Not yet. Although I suspect that when I get back, I'll find the common room loaded down with stolen food and a party in full swing."

"Well, you've certainly got the perfect venue for it." Harry said, remembering the Slytherin common room's extravagant decorations. "I mean you've already got the lights and sound system in place..." His voice trailed off as he realised what he'd just said. Luella stopped in her tracks and turned to look at him, the dawning light of realisation in her eyes. Harry felt his heart sink as those cold blue eyes of hers stared piercingly into his.

"So." she said in a voice so like Snape's it was frightening. "It **was** you! Don't deny it Harry, we knew all along and you just confirmed it. You used Polyjuice Potion to

impersonate Crabbe and Goyle, didn't you? You and Ron, it must have been. Which is probably why Hermione's in the hospital wing. What happened with hers?"

"She used a cat hair instead of a human hair and turned into Catwoman." Harry said sheepishly. "The fur's gone from her face now, and her eyes are back to normal, but she's still got fur all over her arms and I didn't want to ask if the tail had gone. Lu, it's not funny!"

"Sorry." sniggered Luella. "It's just that... Hermione Granger... getting a potion so wrong!" She dissolved into peals of laughter that would have drawn attention had there been anyone around. As it was though, it was Saturday morning and most of the school were back in their common rooms by now.

"Stop laughing!" Harry snapped. "Hermione's very upset by it all. It's not her fault she picked a hair off Millicent Bulstrode's arm and it turned out to be a cat hair." His defences gave out at this point, as he too started laughing uncontrollably.

Luella finally dried her eyes. "Oh dear. Poor Mione. It's not funny really, is it?"

"No. Of course not." Harry composed himself. "We shouldn't laugh."

"No. We shouldn't." The two of them looked at each other, both fighting the urge to giggle again. Luella decided to change the subject. "So what were you two infiltrating our common room for anyway?"

Harry sobered up immediately, as he remembered why he'd been looking for Luella in the first place.

"Well, it was kind of about the Heir of Slytherin."

The smile vanished from Luella's face. "The Heir of Slytherin? What about her, I mean him?" she asked, her voice now sharp and demanding.

"That's it. We kind of thought it might be Malfoy, so we disguised ourselves and tried to get a confession out of him."

"Ingenious. I'm impressed. You should have asked us for help from the start, we've had a bit of experience in getting confessions out of our housemates." Luella recalled their own attempt at espionage three years ago. That had worked like a charm. It would have certainly been some achievement to get the younger Crabbe and Goyle, and Malfoy too, expelled as well.

"Wish we had now." Harry sighed despondently. "You could have made sure we didn't end up with a cat hair anyway. After all that effort, we're the none the wiser who it is. Malfoy says it's not him, and he doesn't know who it might be either. All we've got to go on is this legend of the Second Heir. Except Malfoy didn't really tell us much about it. Luella..." He hesitated, unsure if he was doing the right thing. However, he'd already started asking her, and they did need to know. What the hell, she could only say she didn't know.

"Lu, do you know the legend?" He held his breath, waiting. An eternity seemed to pass. At the mention of the Second Heir legend she'd frozen, her face going pale and the mask that imperceptibly slid across a Slytherin's face whenever you asked them a personal question slammed firmly in place on Luella's. Harry began to wonder whether this had been a good move.

"Hey, look, Lu, don't worry about it. You don't have to tell me. I was just curious. I'll leave you to it." He was about to move away when Luella reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Harry, wait."

Harry stopped walking and turned to look at her again. The Slytherin looked uncertain, as if wrestling with her conscience. Finally, she seemed to decide what to do.

"Alright. Alright, I'll tell you. But not here. Let's go somewhere we won't be heard."

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"You know, Lu, I'm getting just a bit tired of this place."

"Tough. This is the most private place in the school. I'm not risking anyone overhearing us - this is just too important."

"I know, but all the same, here?" Harry looked about him, wrinkling his nose in disgust as he took in the by now familiar first floor girls' toilets, trying to avoid the water covering the floor and threatening to invade his shoes. "Can't we go somewhere a little more comfortable?"

Luella chuckled. "You're as bad as Marls. Honestly, thought Gryffindors were meant to be models of stoicism and unflinching bravery?"

"We are brave!" Harry protested. "We can face armies of marauding Death Eaters without batting an eyelid. We'd just rather do it in comfort if at all possible."

Luella laughed out loud. "My god Harry, are you sure you don't belong in Slytherin after all? That is just so Draco Malfoy."

Harry shut up immediately. Luella immediately realised that she'd said the wrong thing. Harry's face was cold and emotionless, a common enough sight in Slytherin House but rare among the normally passionate Gryffindors. The thought occurred to her that maybe she'd hit just a bit too close to the bone. After all, hadn't Caitlin said that Harry had spent his childhood being ill-treated by his aunt and uncle? Hadn't she seen the abuse first-hand that summer? And wasn't a childhood from hell one of the many things that went to making a Slytherin? She cursed herself for not guessing sooner that maybe he'd almost not made it into Gryffindor.

"Hey look, Harry, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to compare you to Malfoy. Tactless of me."

"You don't know the half of it, Lu." Harry pushed open a cubicle and squatted on the floor. Luella followed him in, cast a Glamour round them and seated herself on the toilet lid. "The Sorting Hat nearly put me in Slytherin. The only reason it didn't was because I asked it not to. Because Hagrid had told me all the Dark wizards were Slytherins."

"But not all Slytherins are Dark wizards." Luella said quietly. "There's a difference, Harry."

He didn't seem to have heard her. "So close, Lu. I was that close. That close to joining the dark side. If I'd gone to Slytherin, I'd have turned into a Dark wizard. I would. I'd have hung out with Malfoy, become friends with him, starting nursing grudges against the Dursleys, maybe started believing all Muggles were like that, maybe started hating them, and anyone who'd grown up with them. I'd have been the next Lord Voldemort. It was that close, Luella, that close. I've been scared ever since, especially when I found out I could speak Parseltongue. I thought it really might be me. That I really might be..." He choked on the words.

"The Heir?"

Harry nodded. Luella knelt down next to him and put her arm round him.

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"No." Harry whispered, burying his head on Luella's shoulder. She held him close for a few minutes, neither of them speaking, just holding each other in a silent communion, the one unable to talk, the other not knowing quite what to say. But Luella's uncertainty did not last long.

"You're not the Heir."

"You said that before."

"I know. But you need to hear it again. In fact, you need to hear a lot of things, Harry Potter. Look at me." Luella lifted his head up and gazed straight into his eyes. The Glamoury slammed into action almost at once, the Mark beginning to glow. It wasn't the hypnosis Glamoury. She didn't want him as some kind of mindless robot. What she had to say needed to be accepted by him of his own free will. So she opted instead for a Glamour that made her look like a true Heir of Slytherin.

"There is more to Slytherin than dark magic. Far more. The true spirit of Slytherin goes far beyond power-hungry Machiavellian social climbers, who simply crave material success. It embraces all who want something more from their lives, who want to be the best they can be and aren't afraid to work to get it." Thank you, Caitlin, Luella prayed silently. Seemed so long ago now, that summer afternoon when Caitlin had uttered those exact same words, in a very similar situation.

"Or worried about what they have to do in the process." said Harry bitterly.

"You know that's not true." Despite the stab of pain at his words, Luella kept her voice level.

"Yeah?" laughed Harry. "Tell that to Lord Voldemort."

"Harry!" Luella's self-control began to wear thin. She couldn't tune Harry out as easily as she could Ron. She swiftly pulled herself together. No use shouting at the boy. "Lord Voldemort isn't all there is to Slytherin, you know. We don't just do Dark Arts. There's a whole neglected seam of Slytherin power that has nothing to do with them, and properly used, can change the world for the better. Did you know that in virtually every single religion the world over, in virtually every culture bar one, the snake has been a symbol of healing and transformation, of divine power and wisdom? Did you? No, of course not. Because you never bothered to find out. Never bothered to look behind the propaganda and see for yourself. The Ravenclaws are about the only ones who ever do, which is why we get on better with them. Ah, Harry, can it be all that Gryffindor fire is blinding you?"

Harry wasn't sure how to react to that. It wasn't that he didn't understand Slytherin - he understood it all too well. But at the same time, he'd never seen anything but cruelty and hate in his own Slytherin side.

"I'm not blind." he whispered. "I'm just... scared." He hung his head, ashamed suddenly, ashamed of the fact that here was an allegedly brave Gryffindor admitting to being scared.

"Don't be." came the unexpectedly comforting response, soft and reassuring, with a tenderness no one had ever shown him before, not that he remembered anyway. Had his mother once spoken to him like that? He didn't know, would never know now. But Luella's gentle tones were a pretty good substitute. As she drew him near her once more, he gave into the embrace, slipping his arms around her waist and letting her hold him.

"Don't be scared of it. One day you might need it. One day it might save your life. Listen to me, Harry. You are not a Dark wizard, and you never will be. Not because you are Gryffindor, but because you can see your own inner darkness. You think you're the only one scared of ending up on the wrong side? You're not. Every Slytherin who hasn't gone over has to deal with that every day, the fear that maybe they're evil by nature, the fear of their power. Want to know something about Slytherin House, Harry? Something that most people never realise, although mainly that's because we do our level best to make sure no one else ever finds out."

"Go on." Harry murmured, intrigued to know what this mysterious secret was.

"OK. Although if anyone else hears about this, I'll have to kill you, you understand."

"Got it."

"Alright then. It's this: we're scared, Harry. Absolutely terrified. All of us. Me, Deanna, Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, all of us. Except maybe Marls. And that's only

because she had to face all her inner demons back in the first year. Everyone else, though, is frightened through and through."

"Frightened?" Harry looked up, unable to believe his ears. "What on earth of?" He couldn't imagine the like of Malfoy or Deanna ever being frightened. And yet it would explain a lot about how Slytherins were able to hide their feelings so well...

"It varies. Everyone's got their own demons. Mostly though, it isn't anything at all, nothing concrete. Just a fear that the world could turn on you at any time, that you can't really trust anyone in case they try and hurt you. That's why we're so ambitious, I think. If we have enough money and power, we think we'll be safe. Of course it never works, so we just keep on trying to get more and more, and we turn into that typical Slytherin stereotype. All because we had crap childhoods. Which most of us did."

"So how come Ginny's a Slyth and her brothers aren't?" Harry asked. "And don't say it was because she grew up poor. Money doesn't seem to have anything to do with it - after all, look at Malfoy. She got treated no worse than her brothers - better if anything. She was the baby of the family and the only girl. And from what Ron tells me, she was as spoilt as anyone could be in the Weasley household."

"Now there's another exception." Luella smiled. "Ginny. A Slytherin raised by Gryffindors, and mentored by the one Slytherin who's generally not afraid of anything and relatively trauma-free. She too is not scared, at least not anymore. And that, I think, is because her reasons for being Slytherin are fairly straightforward and not based on the need for a security blanket. She's sick of being poor. She's sick of being looked down on and being labelled as a Weasley. At home, she's used to being the centre of attention and generally getting doted on, and she'd quite like that in the real world too. Hence, she's ambitious, without being neurotic about it. Same with Marls. She's also the spoilt youngest child and only girl. Like Ginny, she has a father who dotes on her and a mother who would discipline her but is generally too wrapped up in other things. In Ginny's case, her mother's too busy chasing after the rest of the family, in Marlie's because her mother's too busy running the biggest and most important Department at the Ministry. Marlie's never been poor, on the contrary she's always had everything she ever wanted. But she'd quite like to keep it that way, and she certainly doesn't like losing. Which is why she's on the winning team, as she sees it."

"They didn't do too well last year." Harry grinned.

"Harry. Shut up." Luella grimaced, the memory still a little too fresh in he mind. "Besides, I seem to remember it was Marlie saving your neck that gifted the game to Gryffindor. Have a little respect."

"Sorry. I'll try."

"Thank you. Anyway, back to Marls. She too is in Slytherin for non-fear based reasons. She loves the sweet smell of success, but if it doesn't go her way, she won't think it's the end of the world. Sure, she'll sulk and throw tantrums, but she'll deal with it and then start working out how to get it back. Nothing keeps her down for long, mainly because she's used to abundance. She has never had to worry about losing

anything, because there has always been more of the same, or something better, to take its place. Same with Ginny. She never had that much materially, compared to some of her housemates, but one thing she was never short of was affection. She didn't have to earn it, she didn't have to work for it, she got it for free, virtually on tap. The same principle applies. She too is used to getting what she wants. Do you see where I'm coming from here?"

"They're not scared because they believe that something will always turn up eventually. Is that right?"

"Pretty much, yeah." Luella's mind shot back to that night in September, when Snape had lectured her on keeping her innocence, her faith in the world, and had singled out Marlie as someone who had it. Now she was beginning to understand what he'd meant.

Harry was still thinking, and beginning to draw some conclusions of his own. "And the rest of them are scared because they secretly think it won't."

"Something like that, yes."

It clicked. All of a sudden, it dawned on Harry just what made Slytherin House tick. "Marlie and Ginny are optimists - they think the world likes them and if it doesn't they'll blame the world for being too blind to realise it. But the rest of Slytherin are pessimists - that is, they think the world is out to get them and even if things are going well, they'll just be waiting for the hammer to drop."

"Got it in one. There you have it, Harry. That's why so many of us are scared. Because we didn't get that unconditional love as kids. Maybe something happened, or maybe it was just a sense that if we weren't what our parents wanted, we weren't good enough."

Luella broke off and gazed into space, a shadow of pain flickering across her face, as if she was recalling some private memory. "If we weren't what our parents wanted, we weren't good enough." she repeated, as if in a dream.

"Lu..." Harry began, reaching for her arm to try and settle her. She turned back to him, all dreaminess fading away.

"How did you do it?" she demanded. "How did you grow up the way you did, with the Dursleys, and not end up as one of us? How the hell did you never fantasise about killing all of them, or at least torturing them until they begged for mercy? How is it that you never felt the urge to take on the world, just prove to them you really were something special? Why the hell are you such a saint?" Luella nearly screamed the final sentence at him before bursting into tears.

Harry watched in shock. He wasn't used to seeing real tears - Dudley's tantrums didn't count - and he hadn't got a clue how to deal with it. His best hope was that she got over it and quickly. However, he wasn't completely lost. Putting an arm round her shoulders, he tried to comfort her.

"I'm sorry." he whispered. Luella wiped her tears away and looked at him again.

"Damn it, Potter, how'd you manage it, eh? I didn't have a childhood half as bad as yours, and yet I'm still stuck with this wound that won't heal. Wish to God my parents had locked me in my room and starved me, at least then I'd have an excuse. As it is, all I've got is this sense that I'm a failure, that in my parents' eyes I'll never be good enough, because I'm not the popular, talented credit to the family that they wanted. They wanted a beautiful, charming, socially adept leader of the in-crowd. They got me, the lonely misfit with no social skills whatsoever, who'd rather spend the afternoon alone with a book, or in the garden or just outside in a secret place no one else could get to. All this I had to deal with, knowing that my parents thought I was a disappointment, that everyone at school hated me, that all I had was Deanna, and then they found out I was a witch. My god, that was fun. Caitlin, that's Deanna's mum, ended up having to talk them round. Thank god for Caitlin and Deanna, I don't know what I'd have done without them. And that, by Slytherin standards, is considered a good childhood. So how'd you grow up with something far, far worse and not get scarred? Why aren't you Slytherin?"

"I don't know." Harry whispered. "I don't know! Because by all rights I should be. I'm not a saint! Every day, every bloody day, I used to dream about getting my revenge on all of them. I used to fantasise about going away and becoming really rich and successful, then coming back and watching them grovel before turning away in contempt. And you know what?"

"What?"

"I still do." He smiled this strange, twisted smile that Luella never thought she'd see on a Gryffindor face. "I still do want it. It's not my deepest desire, but it's definitely in the top three. At the back of my mind, it's there constantly, this little fantasy of what I'd like to do to them. That's why I'm scared, Lu. That's my Slytherin side. Deep down inside, I know I'm capable of doing the most horrible things. And I've spent all my life since trying to stop it winning. Even now, I'm still not sure I really belong in Gryffindor. I'm still scared that I'm only really here because I didn't want to be in Slytherin. I feel like such a fraud, Lu! I just hope Ron doesn't find out..."

His voice trailed off. Luella held him in silence. So that was why he'd feared he might be the Heir. Now wasn't that interesting? Harry Potter, the famous hero who'd defeated the Dark Lord, was tormented by the thought that he might become one himself. The natural reaction was to gloat, but if she was really honest about it, her heart wasn't in it. In fact, she actually felt far closer to him than she ever really had before. Now she'd seen his secret fear, it made him seem more... human. She lifted his chin, turning his face towards hers. Cute. Very cute. Admittedly he was only twelve right now, but one day he was going to make some lucky girl a very happy lady indeed.

"You're not a fraud. And you're not evil. Even if you should have been a Slytherin, what does your house have to do with anything? Deanna's got your problem in reverse - what else is that hot temper and barely controlled rage but a rather primitive Gryffindor side? That's more likely to get her in trouble than her ambition. And yet that same side of her could equally well make her a hero one day. Same goes with your Slytherin side. In the right circumstances, a bit of ruthlessness might be exactly what you need. It's all a matter of doing the right thing at the right time, and making

sure you can control it instead of the other way round. Holds true for all of us, Slytherin and Gryffindor alike, although most people prefer to look the other way when the subject of dark sides comes up. The only thing that makes Slytherin different is that its members tend to have more problematic dark sides, and post-Voldemort, we don't have the option of looking the other way anymore. It's either deal with it constructively or give in. You're not a Slytherin, but you do have that in common with us - you can't ignore it either. But that doesn't mean you're doomed." She pushed his fringe back out of his eyes, getting a good look at them gazing up at her in awe, two vivid pools of green, beautiful and alluring like the sea, and potentially as dangerous, not out of malice but simply because of what they were. Those were eyes you could drown in given the chance. Luella wondered who he'd inherited them from and what house they'd been in. Slytherin eyes, almost definitely. She resumed talking.

"Even in Slytherin, you would never have joined the dark side. You know it far too intimately, see it far too clearly to be taken in by it. It is precisely because you feel you are in danger from it that you will not succumb. Those who believe it won't hurt them, or that they are safe from it, they are the ones most likely to join of their own free will or be tricked by it. Whereas those of us who have to fight the battle every single day are far harder to deceive. Don't fear your Slytherin side, Harry. There is much it can teach you about good and evil, and knowing the difference. Use it wisely, and no one will ever fool you again. You'll be able to see things for what they are. Admittedly, the price is that you won't be able to retreat behind any comforting illusions about the world, but I don't think you had that many in the first place. It can lead to cynicism. But if you can learn the trick of keeping that knowledge, and at the same time regain the ability to enjoy life, you'll find it well worth the effort. It's a Fall from Grace and no mistake - why else do you think those who know no better have snakes down as the original tempters? But for every fall, there is a redemption, and I believe that brings us back to your original question."

She let the Glamour that had automatically woven itself around her fade away. Harry, released from its spell, shivered and blinked, trying to restore some sense of normality. It didn't work. He couldn't get rid of the emotions he'd felt as Luella had been speaking to him, of the strange and disturbing desire to throw himself at her feet, to surrender himself to her, offer up himself up body and soul to whatever cause she was espousing. He'd been entirely at her mercy, and what was more she knew it. In fact, he was still entirely at her mercy. One hand was still resting on his shoulder, and the other in her lap, perilously close to his knee. He found himself willing it to move closer, willing both hands to reach out for him and pull him in, render him helpless and subject him to every wanton desire that a Slytherin's psyche could come up with.

He came to his senses with a jolt, realising just what he was thinking. Shocked at himself, he backed away from her. She didn't try and stop him. She just watched him calmly with those terrifying eyes of hers, those beautiful eyes that seemed to strip away his defences and call on him to surrender his soul.

Slowly, Harry picked himself up and dared to look at her directly. Whatever power had been radiating from her appeared to have subsided, for she looked quite normal again. However, there was an oddly detached look of curiosity in her eyes, as if she regarded him as a plaything designed purely for her amusement. Trying to ignore the

part of him that desperately wanted to be Luella Martin's plaything, he rallied his courage.

"What are you?" he whispered.

"Just an ordinary Slytherin teenager." came the mischievous reply. "Who can occasionally put on quite a show when she puts her mind to it. Are you OK now, Harry?"

"I think so." He shook himself. "Luella, what was all that? About good and evil, and stuff. And what does it have to do with the Second Heir?"

"Everything. The path of Slytherin is a difficult and dangerous one. It involves meeting your innermost fears and demons, confronting evil at its worst, and overcoming it. Choosing not to take that road without falling into the trap of projecting it outside you. Accepting the darkness and turning it into something useful. But that's by no means an easy task. Small wonder so many Slytherins end up giving into it and taking the easy route to power that it offers. Our reputation is justified in many respects. But not all. You know the legend of the Chamber of Secrets."

"Yeah. Salazar Slytherin built it after Godric Gryffindor kicked him out of Hogwarts. He left a monster hidden inside it until his true Heir would turn up and use it to get rid of the Muggle-borns. But where does the Second Heir fit in? Salazar would only need one, wouldn't he?"

"Of course. Salazar only needs one Heir. But who said the Second Heir is heir to Salazar?" Again that mischievous grin, as Luella began toying with a strand of his hair.

"Not Salazar Slytherin's Heir?" Harry blinked. "But... who else's Heir would he be?"

"Typical Gryffindor male!" Luella sighed. "Harry, you disappoint me. Once again you've fallen for the usual trap men fall into, creating complex mysteries when the truth is really quite simple, by disregarding the other half of society."

"I don't understand." Harry said, his mind a blank.

"Harry you fool. You're leaving out the women! The Second Heir is not a he but a she. Salazar was not the only Slytherin - he was married, twice. And he had children. One of whom belonged to a very powerful dynasty of witches called the Tal-y-Rhys. Her name was Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, and it is from her that Second Heir will be descended."

"Oh. Right." Harry scratched his head, none the wiser. "And what does the Second Heir do? Does he get rid of Muggle-borns too?"

"No." Luella snapped at him. "She is there to try and stop the first. See, Morgan wasn't a power-crazed despot like her father. She took after her mother, who was quite nice and well-balanced. When she heard what he'd done, she was horrified. She tried her best, but there was no way she could even begin to undo the enchantments

he'd laid. So she decided to beat him at his own game. She put her own spells on the Chamber and made a prophecy stating that fifty years after the first Heir had come, he would be followed by the Second Heir, who would take him on in battle and defeat him. She would then bring about peace between the houses and heal the wounds of magical society. And she's going to need help from Gryffindor to do it, that's the whole point. Do you understand what I'm saying here?"

"So, the Second Heir's one of the good guys then?" Harry said, uncertainly.

"Yes."

"Not out to kill lots of people, then?"

"Not unless I- I mean, she has to, no."

"Not trying to wipe out all the Muggle-borns at all?"

"Hardly." For some reason, Luella seemed to find that idea rather amusing. By this time however, Harry had given up trying to fathom out what was going on so he thought nothing of it. There was however one thing he couldn't work out at all.

"So if the Second Heir's not evil, who's carrying out all the attacks?"

At this, a shadow crossed Luella's face.

"I don't know. But this I tell you, it isn't the Second Heir. I do have one lead though."

"And that is?" Harry leaned forward attentively.

"We think the First Heir might be involved. Or, to be more accurate, someone using his power for their own ends."

"But didn't they catch the First Heir fifty years ago?" Harry asked, confused.

"Don't be silly. Of course not. He's still very much at large. Why else do you think we still need a Second Heir?"

"Well... I suppose... when you put it like that..." Harry admitted.

"Exactly, Harry. However, we've reason to believe that there's little risk of him being here in person. But we do think that there might be some artefact or something that is able to manifest his power and someone might be using that to do the attacks."

"Someone like Malfoy, you mean." Harry said grimly.

"Very possibly, although we've no idea who it is. It really could be anyone." Luella sighed.

Another thought occurred to Harry. "Lu, why do you keep saying 'we'? Who else is involved?"

"Quite a few of us, Harry. You'd be surprised. Don't know how much I should tell you, but let's just say for now that there's a group of us dedicated to helping the Second Heir succeed in her task."

"What, the Ministry of Magic?" Harry asked. The look Luella gave him once again reminded him that where Slytherins were concerned, he had a lot to learn.

"Now, now." Luella chided him. "The Ministry's official position is that there's no truth to the Heir of Slytherin legends whatsoever. Everyone from Mr. Fudge downwards will tell you that."

Gryffindor though he was, Harry wasn't completely naive. And he was beginning to appreciate the way in which Slytherin minds worked.

"And what's the Ministry's unofficial position?"

"Couldn't tell you." Luella grinned. "I don't work there."

Harry groaned in exasperation. Clearly getting any information out of Luella on the subject of this secretive little group she was part of was a lost cause. However, there was just one more thing he had to ask.

"Luella, who is the Second Heir? Do you know?"

The Slytherin froze. However, before she could think of a convincing lie or summon up some Glamoury, they were both distracted by a noise. The sound of the door opening.

Harry turned to Luella, his mouth open, about to speak. Luella pressed a finger to her lips and cast a Glamour over him. Far easier to talk her way out of things if whoever it was could only see her. From outside, they could hear voices.

"Are you sure no one'll see us here?" came a boy's voice. It sounded familiar, although Luella couldn't place it at all. Harry, however, recognised it at once and sat bolt upright, listening very carefully indeed.

"Course not." a girl replied. This time, Luella had no trouble recognising her. Penelope Clearwater. "No one ever comes here. Especially not since the attacks started."

"No one except my brother and his friends. Honestly Penny, if Ron walks in on us, I'll never live it down."

"Ashamed of me, are you?" There was a distinct note of resentment to her voice.

"No, of course not, dear." the boy hastily reassured her. "You know I think you're wonderful. And I'd love to show you off, you know I would. But I'm a Prefect, if the other pupils knew I had a girlfriend they'd show me no respect whatsoever. Especially my brothers."

"And they show you so much at the moment, don't they?" Penelope teased.

"I'll have you know the younger pupils regard me as something of a mentor. A role model, someone they can look up to. Only last week, those Slytherin second year girls were asking my advice on how they could follow in my footsteps. Very attentive and polite, they were."

"Yes, and while you were pontificating on the virtues of self-discipline, that Malfoy kid was creating a sign above your head saying 'Percy Weasley is a Smeghead.'"

Luella realised where she'd heard the voice before. It was Fred and George's older brother, Percy the Prefect, or 'Bonehead' as his brothers usually referred to him. And he was dating her cousin? Oh god, this was going to make for some fun family gatherings. Although Percy seemed intent on keeping it quiet so it looked as if she was safe. And there was also little risk of her parents ever meeting Percy - his company was depressing enough without having to listen to her mother saying what a nice young man he was then pointedly saying that at least one member of the family had found a suitable boyfriend, looking at Luella the whole time. Once more, she silently gave thanks for ending up at a boarding school, far, far away from her parents.

"Now, now, Penny." Percy was saying. "It wasn't that nice Miss Parkinson's fault that Malfoy's not grown out of the puerile humour stage yet. You should have seen Miss Zabini blushing. She looked quite embarrassed."

"She was trying to stop laughing. And you're more naive than I took you for if you thought Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy hadn't planned it all along. Honestly, Percy, they're always making fun of you behind your back. Maybe if they saw you letting your hair down and acting like a normal human being, they might be less inclined to tease you. Come on, Percy, will you promise me you'll think about it?"

"Penny..." Percy protested.

"Please?"

Luella had never had Penelope Clearwater, or indeed any of the Ravenclaw girls, down as the type to pout and flutter their eyelids when talking to a man. However, it appeared she'd been wrong.

"Oh for god's sake. Alright, alright, I'll think about it!"

"Thank you, darling. That's all I ask."

Luella decided at this point that she'd better make her presence felt before either of them said or did anything embarrassing. Not to mention before Harry gave them both away by bursting out laughing. He was already starting to snigger. Getting to her feet, Luella carefully opened the toilet door and emerged, coughing delicately.

"Erm... am I interrupting anything?"

Percy spun round, his face pale with horror. Penelope on the other hand seemed overjoyed to see her again.

"Lu! How are you! Great to see you again! Percy, this is my cousin Luella Martin. Luella, this is Percy Weasley, but you probably knew that."

"Everybody knows Percy Weasley." Luella smiled. "Ginny talks about you all the time. She's always saying what a brilliant older brother you are. She thinks the world of you. Really looks up to you."

Luella's words had the desired effect. Percy's face went the same colour as his hair.

"Does she really? I - I mean, that's great, I mean, that's really nice of her, I - yes, of course she does. Ginny and I, we've always been close. I like to think I've been something of a mentor to her." The air of benevolent paternalism reminded Luella of Lockhart. However, unlike Lockhart, Percy still appeared to have retained some form of humility. There was hope for him yet. If Penelope took him well in hand, he might yet turn out to be quite agreeable.

"She certainly likes you." Luella upped the charm a bit. Maybe here was an opportunity to do Ginny a little favour. "That's why she's in Slytherin, you know. She wanted to be like you so much, the Sorting Hat could only pick up on all that ambition and put her with us."

"Really?" Percy's pomposity melted away entirely. "Oh... that's... that's really nice..."

Luella shot a look at Penelope, who was looking on and smiling approvingly. The older girl winked at her, giving her a thumbs up. Luella smiled back.

"Anyway, I'd best be going. Give you two some privacy." A knowing look that indicated Luella knew exactly what they were doing there. Penelope blushed, while Percy immediately began squirming.

"Ah. Erm, Luella, you, er, won't tell anyone we were here, will you? Not that either of us were up to anything we shouldn't have been, you understand, but it could prove rather embarrassing. You see what I mean."

"Of course." Luella replied levelly. "I will be the soul of discretion. You have my word."

"Thank you." said Percy. "Well, I'd better be off. Us Prefects don't have much time to relax. Nice to have met you, Luella. Coming, Penny?"

"In a minute. I just want to have a quick chat with Lu."

"OK. See you in a bit." Percy headed out, ears still pink. Penelope turned to Luella.

"I should be telling you off for lying like that, but I think it turned out for the best, don't you? He's really flattered by that."

"Well, if it gets him treating Ginny nicely again, it will be well worth it."

At this, Penelope looked worried.

"Oh lord, I just thought. What if he talks to Ginny and finds out she thinks nothing of the sort? Then what?"

"I wouldn't worry." Luella reassured her. "She's a Slytherin and Marlie's protégée as well. She should have the wit to play along. Hope so anyway. If not, I'll have to weasel my way out of it and pretend I misunderstood the situation."

"Well, whatever, I think you've made his day!" smiled Penelope. "You know, he's so different underneath that public persona of his. Really generous and sweet, not at all bossy and pompous like he can seem sometimes. When we're alone, he is the most wonderful man in the world. I just wish he'd be like that in public too." Penelope sighed, frustrated.

"Guess it can't be easy, having to keep it under wraps the whole time." mused Luella.
"How long have you been seeing him for?"

"Since last May. We ran into each other by chance in the library while revising for our exams. He kept asking me what the time was, or if I knew where to find such and such a book, or if he could borrow a quill or parchment. Eventually, I asked him if anything was the matter, and he confessed he was just making excuses to talk to me, because I had really nice eyes. Then he asked me out and I was so taken aback I said yes. It all sort of went on from there."

"And you've been keeping it quiet all that time. Wow." Luella said in admiration, partly at their ability to keep it a secret somewhere like Hogwarts all that time, and partly at Penelope's patience.

"Yeah. Impressive, isn't it?" Penelope laughed bitterly. "A boyfriend I can't even talk about. Having to listen to Mum and Rachel chat about boys and clothes and things, then Mum asking me if I'm seeing anyone, and having to say no. Then they just give me these pitying looks and say never mind, and it just feels horrible. You know Lu, it's at times like that I can't help being reminded that Annabel's only my stepmum. Her and Rachel, they've got this cool mother-daughter bond going on and I feel really left out sometimes. Wonder if my real mum'd feel sorry for me being single." Penelope looked at the floor, downcast.

"She wouldn't." Luella said, her heart going out to her. For a moment, she felt a few pangs of guilt at Penelope having to grow up motherless. She brushed them aside. After all, she was Luella now. But that didn't mean she didn't care. "She wouldn't have minded at all. Besides, I rather think she'd have guessed you were seeing someone and had it out of you."

"You think so?"

"Sure of it. That's if you hadn't told her yourself."

"Which I might well have done. You know, I really miss her, Lu. Annabel's OK, but it's not the same. Still, it could be worse and I still have Dad. And you, now." She smiled at Luella suddenly. "It's cool finally meeting my real mum's family, you know? Sort of helps me imagine what she was like. And it's something I've got that really is mine. Relatives that'll put me first for a change, that don't have any other family ties. Having you at Hogwarts is great! A magical relative I don't have to share with the twins. It's fantastic."

"I know. I know just how you feel!" Penelope's happiness was obviously contagious, for Luella couldn't stop smiling either. "I was thinking something similar myself. Having a magical relative here at Hogwarts makes me feel a lot more at home. Kind of like I really do have a right to be here. You've no idea how important that is to me."

"No, but from what I've heard about Slytherin, I can imagine." said Penelope grimly. She placed a sympathetic hand on Luella's shoulder. "Can't be easy being Muggle-born when all your housemates have family and money all over the place and lineages stretching back to the Founding."

"It's not so bad, really." For some reason, even though Luella knew that what Penelope was saying was true, she felt the urge to defend her house. "I mean, no one ever says anything to my face, and believe me, I feel a lot more at home there than I would anywhere else. Just I can feel a little out of place there sometimes. Wouldn't swap for the world though."

"Not even to Ravenclaw?" Penelope said, with the merest hint of sadness.

"After two weeks, the constant studying and debating of intellectual minutiae would wear me out. I'd start to miss all the internal politics and constant scheming. Say what you like about Slytherin, it's never dull."

"You really don't know the twins that well, do you?" said Penelope wryly. "Come on, let's go. Fancy coming to the library? Hitting the books?"

"Maybe later. I've got a couple of errands to run."

"No problem. See you later, Lu!" Penelope disappeared back into the school.

Luella waited until the door closed behind her before opening the cubicle door and removing the protective Glamour.

"It's alright, they've gone. You can come out now, Harry."

"Thank God for that, I thought you two were going to stand around chatting all day." Harry staggered into the open, massaging his legs, trying to restore some sense of feeling. "You have no idea how uncomfortable it is sitting crouched down in a small space unable to move. My poor bottom..."

"Did you not think to sit on the toilet instead?" Luella asked.

That stopped him. "Um, no. You were sitting on it, I felt bad about pinching your seat." Harry confessed, blushing.

Luella couldn't help laughing. "Not while I was talking to Penny, I wasn't! You, Harry, are too gentlemanly by half. Still, it was rather sweet of you, I must admit."

Harry blushed again, although this time for rather different reasons. Luella decided to change the subject.

"So how are your legs now? Can you feel them yet?"

"I can feel them alright, but I wish I couldn't." Harry shook his right leg out, then his left, before looking up at Luella curiously. "That Penelope girl's your cousin, is she? I didn't know you had magical relatives."

"Nor did I until this Christmas. She's really my second cousin or something like that, our mothers were cousins. But her mum died when she was just a baby and her dad moved away so she never knew any of my family. Fortunately, her dad remarried Marlie Lovegood's aunt, and I ran into her at their Christmas party. We got chatting and I found out she's a distant cousin. Cool, eh?"

"Cool. How'd her mother die?"

"Same way yours did."

Harry's curiosity disappeared at once. "Oh! Poor girl. But her dad made it, did he?"

"Yeah, the Aurors got there in time. In fact, it was Deanna's mum, Caitlin. They took one look at her and legged it."

"Blimey. Is she really that frightening?"

"Oh yeah. Surely Hermione's told you her nickname, Caitlin the Cold-Blooded?"

"Well, yeah. But I thought everyone was exaggerating. Didn't know all the stories about how violent and ruthless she is were actually true." Something seemed to occur to Harry as he turned introspective. "Wish she'd got there in time when Voldemort went for my parents."

"Harry..." Luella reached out for him. He brushed her away.

"Hey, don't worry. I'm not upset or anything, just regretful. Can't miss what I never had after all." A grin began to creep across his face. "So this cousin of yours. Seeing Percy Weasley, is she?"

"It looks like it. Stop laughing! I expect he's a perfectly nice boy!"

"Lu, you're sounding just like your mother."

"You've never met my mother!"

"No, but I expect that's what she'd say about Percy if she met him."

"She would say nothing of the sort -" Luella began, but was pulled up short by the memory of what her mother would probably do if she ever met Percy and Penelope.

"Oh god." was all she could say. Harry didn't answer, just smiled innocently. "Stop looking at me like that!" she snapped at him. "Look, regardless of what our personal opinions might be, Penny likes him. And as long as my cousin is happy, that's all that matters. Got it?"

"Yes, Lu." Harry nodded. "So, do you reckon I should tell Ron then? He'd have a field day with this, not to mention what the twins would do."

"Harry!" Luella's tone of voice made it quite clear that there was to be no argument on this topic. "Breathe one word of this to anyone, anyone at all, and I will personally use Polyjuice Potion on Deanna and myself, infiltrate Gryffindor Tower and leave a rather unpleasant surprise waiting for you in your dorm. I am not having my cousin upset just because you want to make Percy's life a misery. Do I make myself clear?"

Harry stopped smirking at once. "OK, OK. Not a word. Promise. Besides, it's not that funny, really. I just think it's a bit rich for him to tell me and Ron off for going in here, then using the place as a private rendezvous spot to meet his girlfriend in, that's all."

"It was Penny's idea." Luella reminded him.

"Suppose it was. In that case, I hope he appreciated the irony of it all." Harry looked around him at the dingy surroundings. "God, this place is depressing. Let's get out of here."

"Couldn't agree with you more, Harry. Come on." Luella headed for the door, profoundly relieved that Harry seemed to have forgotten all about the Heir of Slytherin.

Harry made to follow her. However, he stopped short, his attention caught by a small black object lying on the floor. He picked it up. It proved to be a little black book.

"Hey, Lu!" he called to her. "Is this yours?"

Luella turned round. "What is it?"

"It's a book. Muggle diary from the look of it."

"Not mine. Don't have one, and if I did, it'd be under lock, key, and the strongest security hexes in existence in my dorm. What's in it, anything interesting?"

Harry flicked through the pages. "Not a thing, it's completely blank."

"Oh." Luella lost interest, and in doing so, made what probably ranked as the biggest mistake she'd make that year. "You may as well keep it then, Harry. See ya later."

She left the room and walked away towards the library. Harry followed her out and made for the Gryffindor common room, still examining his new find. It was then that he noticed something odd about it. It had been lying in a puddle when he'd picked it up, and the covers were soaked through. The actual pages though, were completely unharmed. They didn't even look as if they'd ever been wet. And yet the book had been half submerged. Odd indeed, especially for a Muggle book. Deciding that this merited further investigation, he tucked the book into his pocket and hurried off.

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Chapter Seventeen Calculated Risks

"Well? Did you find anything out?" asked Ron as Harry slipped into their dorm, noiselessly closing the door behind him. That was something Ron had never understood about Harry, how he could move so quietly, just be so unobtrusive all the time. If Ron had had Harry's fame, he'd be advertising it at every opportunity. No sense simply opening a door when you could get away with kicking it open and striding in shouting "Bow before me, mortals!", after all. Harry, on the other hand, moved almost like a Slytherin. If Harry hadn't been his friend, Ron would have mistrusted his every move, however as it was, he just accepted it. Harry had never had to fight six siblings for attention after all.

"Maybe. There anyone else around?" He looked around, scanning the room in yet another mannerism that was just a little too Slytherin for Ron's liking.

"No, you're safe. Neville was here earlier, but I managed to get him to leave by hiding Trevor and persuading him to go and look for him. He'll be gone for a while, I think. So. What'd you find out then?" Ron settled down on Harry's bed, folding his legs into a Lotus position.

Harry joined him, face flushed with excitement now he knew he wasn't going to be overheard.

"A lot. Luella told me exactly what the Heir of Slytherin legend was. Binns was right about the first heir - he'll be Salazar's descendant, trying to wipe out all the Muggle-borns."

"Harry, I gathered that much. But what's all this about a Second Heir? Why would Salazar need two?"

Harry just smiled in enigmatic superiority. "That's what I said. And of course, he doesn't need two."

Ron frowned, his forehead crinkling in confusion. "So whose Heir is the Second Heir then?"

"Ah-ha! That's the clever bit. See, Salazar Slytherin had kids."

Ron screwed up his face in disgust. "Argh! That's horrible! Who on earth would want to shag him?"

"Ron, stop making a fuss. Someone had to or else there'd be no heirs at all."

"That's a bad thing how?"

"A bad thing in that the Second Heir's one of the good guys. See, Salazar had a daughter called Morgan."

Something clicked in Ron's mind. "Hang on. She wasn't a Tal-y-Rhys, was she?"

"Yeah, that's right. Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin. Why?" Harry looked at Ron curiously.

"Because they're a bad lot, Harry." said Ron, troubled. "They were Dark witches. Apparently they used to do all sorts of horrible things, like abducting innocent young men and completely brainwashing them so they'd forget their families and communities. They were so good at it that men would actually say that they preferred living with the Tal-y-Rhys to living with their own families and refuse to come back. Then they'd drain them of their life force and when they'd finished, kick them out and leave them, a barren lifeless husk. And if any of their daughters got pregnant, they'd make them drink these poisonous potions that'd make them lose the baby. Mum reckons they used make their sons work for them as slaves, that's if they didn't sacrifice them at birth. And if you fell in love with a Tal-y-Rhys witch, they'd never let you marry her or anything. You'd have to go and live with them, and they'd make you do all the chores and everything. Then there's what they'd do to women."

"Why, what did they do to women?" asked Harry, intrigued despite a nagging intuition that there was more to this than met the eye.

"They used to get their male slaves to seduce them and entice them away from their husbands and children. They'd never be seen again. Occasionally, war parties did manage to capture them and bring them back, but by then it'd be too late. They'd have been brainwashed so thoroughly that they'd actually cry and scream when their captors got executed, and they'd practically have to be forced to go back home. And... and sometimes Harry, and this is the really awful bit, they used to get their women to seduce" and here Ron gulped before continuing, "*other women.*" He shuddered. "Horrible. So many young women and girls with their whole lives ahead of them, traumatised by those bastards. The Tal-y-Rhys ruined lives, Harry. Thank the gods there's none left now. They all got executed back in the Middle Ages. There's rumours that a few remnants still survive, but the Ministry reckons it put paid to them all years ago. Good thing too, Mum reckons. She says they were all a bunch of young hussies and if they ever tried to return she'd give them what-for. She doesn't say it, but they were mostly Slytherin too. She reckons that a lot of Slytherins would love the Tal-y-Rhys to come back, those that don't back Malfoy anyhow. Especially Slytherin women. They've not had a decent opportunity to gain power since the Tal-y-Rhys witch trials." Ron lowered his voice. "That's why I'm so worried about Ginny. The Tal-y-Rhys may be gone, but there's plenty of Slytherins out there who know their magical techniques, or some of them anyway. I'm really worried they might start

brainwashing her, that's if they haven't already. You heard her this morning. She said that being Slytherin was the best thing that had ever happened to her. That it had *set her free*. What's happening, Harry? What are they doing to my sister?" Ron stared helplessly at him, eyes begging for an answer, for some meaning to it all.

Unfortunately, if he'd been hoping for one from Harry, he was to be disappointed.

"Helping her settle in, it seems. I don't think I've ever seen her so in control. And if you're hoping the Tal-y-Rhys stay dead and buried, you're in for a nasty shock." Harry took a deep breath before staring him straight in the eye. "They're the only ones who can defeat the Heir of Salazar. See, Morgan wasn't evil like her father. When she heard what he'd done, she tried to undo the magic. But it was too strong even for her. So she added magic of her own to the Chamber of Secrets, and made a prophecy that fifty years after the first heir had come, there would be a second, descended from her, who would take on the first and defeat him. And she'd bring about peace between the houses, heal the wounds of magical society and restore Slytherin House to glory. She's one of the good guys, Ron. And she's the only one who can defeat the other heir, do you see? We've got to find her and help her, that's the only way of stopping the attacks. Are you with me, Ron?"

Ron didn't answer. He just stared numbly at Harry. "My god," he whispered. "Don't tell me they've got you too."

"RON!" Harry yelled at him, jerking the other boy out of his shock. "Luella did not brainwash me! Good god, Ron, what is it with you and Slytherins? You seem to think they're all out to take over the world and stab you in the back."

"Well... aren't they?" Ron asked, perplexed.

"No!" snapped Harry. He paused, recalling most of the Slytherins he knew. "Well, not all of them, anyway. Look, anyway, it doesn't matter. Point is, we need to find out who the Second Heir is, because she's the only one who can stop the attacks. And I am going to do it, Ron. With or without you. Now are you with me or not?" The penetrating look in his eyes reminded Ron of Snape. The boy shivered nervously.

"OK, OK, I'm with you. But if this Second Heir turns out to be dodgy, I'm out of here, OK? Now, did Luella say who it was?"

Harry shook his head. "No. I asked her but got interrupted before she could reply. I think she might know, though."

"Why's that?"

"Because we're not the only ones trying to find the Second Heir. Luella admitted that there was a whole group of people all trying to find her and help her succeed in her mission, and she's one of them. But she didn't say who it was. Maybe she's been sworn to secrecy."

"Maybe," said Ron thoughtfully, another idea beginning to form. "Or maybe not. Anything else?"

"There was one thing. Take a look at this." Harry produced the diary he'd found. Ron took one look and backed away in horror.

"What the hell is that??" he gasped.

"A book. Ron, stop freaking out. It's just someone's diary."

Ron calmed down a little but was not reassured. "Harry, there's some very dangerous books out there. You should see some of the ones Dad's confiscated. There was one that'd burn your eyes out if you tried to read it, and another one disguised as a series of harmless children's books that turned you into a hopeless obsessive, unable to do anything except contemplate various different combinations of characters going out with each other, and then there was this one that looked just like a Muggle newspaper, which if you read it for long enough made you really believe that there were hordes of asylum seekers and immigrants trying to invade the country and steal your job, defraud the benefits system and shag your daughters."

"Ron, that's the *Daily Mail*. It really is a Muggle newspaper."

"It is?" Ron blinked in surprise. "Oh. Never mind. And then right, there was this one by some witch from Surrey, Matthews I think her name was, that you could *never stop reading*. You'd have to carry it around with you for the rest of your life, doing everything one-handed, only able to see out of the corner of your eyes. And..."

"Ron!" Fascinating as this lurid description of all the dangerous books that Mr. Weasley had ever confiscated was, Harry did have other things he wanted to discuss. "Can we get back to the point, please? There doesn't seem to be anything too bad about it. It's a perfectly normal looking Muggle diary."

"Oh. Right." The implications of this suddenly sunk in. "A diary, eh? Whose is it?" Ron leaned forward, hoping it belonged to one of the Slytherins.

"Belongs to a T. M. Riddle."

"T. M. Riddle?" said Ron, sharply.

"That's right. You know him?"

"Not exactly. But I know the name. Remember that detention we had to do at the beginning of term? Filch had me scrubbing all those trophies. Well, one of them was his. Riddle's. Got an Award for Special Services to the School. I remember because I belched slugs all over it and had to clean it twice. Took ages." Ron shivered at the memory.

"What did he get an award for?" Harry asked, all ears.

"Don't know. Didn't say. Just said Award for Special Services to Hogwarts, presented 1943 to Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"1943?" Harry gasped. He reached out and took Ron by the shoulders. "Ron, are you absolutely sure it was 1943?"

"Course I'm sure, if you'd spent half an hour scrubbing the bloody thing, you'd remember every single detail too." snapped Ron. "Yes, it's absolutely, positively, definitely, without a doubt 1943. Why do you ask?"

"Because," Harry whispered, "it's 1993 right now. Fifty years after Riddle got his award. Fifty years ago, Ron!"

Ron, contrary to popular belief, was not as clueless as is often thought. The penny dropped immediately.

"When the Chamber was opened first time around. Oh!" Ron's eyes widened. "So Riddle was here then! He might know something about it! Harry, open the diary, what's it say?"

Harry smiled a very tight-lipped smile as he showed Ron the diary. "Bad luck, mate. Nothing in it. It's a 1943 diary alright, but it's completely blank."

"Oh." Ron deflated, flicking through the diary's unmarked pages. Frustrated, he passed the diary back to Harry. "Never mind. Maybe we'll find another lead somehow."

Harry took it back. "Still, don't you think it's just a little odd that a 1943 diary belonging to someone who got a Special Award that very year just happens to turn up when the trouble starts all over again?"

"Well yeah, I guess. But if it's blank, I don't see how it helps us."

Harry tapped the book. "It looks blank. But I can't help feeling there's more to it than meets the eye. I can't help feeling that Riddle's important. I mean, Special Awards aren't given out for no reason, are they? You've got to do something pretty outstanding to get one. So what if Riddle got his for catching the first heir, or at least stopping him from carrying out any more attacks?"

"It's certainly possible. But Harry, you're forgetting one thing. Riddle's not here, is he? And we don't know where to find him. He could be dead for all we know. All we have is this diary, and it's not exactly giving its secrets away, is it?" He indicated the book with one dismissive flick of his wrist.

Harry refused to let the matter drop. "That doesn't mean there's none to be found. I'm not giving up on it, Ron. Come on, let's go find Hermione. She might have an idea about it."

"And if she hasn't?" Ron did not sound hopeful.

"If she hasn't, then we'll try the library, see if we can find out anything about Tom Riddle. It might give us something to go on, at any rate. Come on, let's go." He got up to leave.

"I hope you're right, Harry." sighed Ron as he followed him out. "I hope you're right."

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For a place intended for study and learning, Hogwarts Library on a Saturday morning was surprisingly busy. Madam Pince had the day off, and a couple of bored junior librarians were running the show instead. This much Luella had gathered from the noise. Students from all houses tended to use the library as a meeting place and social gathering point with students of other houses, and authority's absence meant that there wasn't actually a lot in the way of work getting done.

Most of the noise seemed to be emanating from a big table in the centre. Luella wasn't surprised in the slightest to see Marlie sitting there fretting over a blank piece of parchment, with Rianne sitting next to her, idly filing her nails and studying a pink newspaper that, if Luella hadn't known better, she would have sworn was the *Financial Times*. On Marlie's other side, Deanna was taking notes from one of the textbooks her mother had bought her, presumably acquiring some knowledge that would actually prove helpful one day. Also seated at this table were the Clearwater twins working on some designs that were almost certainly not on the Hogwarts curriculum, Ginny and her friends doing the crossword in *Teen Witch*, and to Luella's surprise, Hermione Granger, frantically poring over a Transfiguration tome, looking perfectly normal and apparently fur-free.

"Hermione?" Luella took the empty seat in between her and Deanna.

"Yes?" The Gryffindor did not look up.

"What are you doing here?"

"Studying, what else would I be doing in a library?" Hermione answered, somewhat testily.

"But... Harry told me... I mean, I thought you were... Aren't you meant to be in the hospital wing?" Luella asked, puzzled.

"I was. But I was so worried about missing something important that Madam Pomfrey decided to let me out early. Good thing she did, I'm so behind!" Hermione began nibbling one of her fingernails. "I only hope I can catch up in time."

"I shouldn't think that'd be a problem." Luella took a look at the material Hermione was working on. While she knew it well enough, it was fairly advanced for someone halfway through their second year. "You look like you're doing well enough."

"I know, I know." sighed Hermione. "But it's important! It might come up in the exams, and if I don't know it now, I'm going to have real problems when I come to do my revision!"

Assiduous in her studies as Luella was, even she hadn't begun to think about exams yet, and the thought disturbed her. Time for a change of subject.

"So how'd you end up in the hospital wing anyway? Harry mentioned something about a potion gone wrong."

"Oh, the potion was fine. I just used the wrong kind of hair with it and ended up changing into a cat. I've still got some fur on my arms and back, although thankfully most of it's gone now. Madam Pomfrey reckons I'll be alright though, just as long as I keep taking the potion she gave me. I should be fine in a week or so. I'd be grateful if you didn't mention it to anyone though. It's a bit embarrassing."

"I won't say a word." Luella promised. "Still, it'll teach you not to go messing around with shapeshifting potions in an attempt to spy on other houses, won't it?"

Hermione's jaw dropped. "You know about that? Oh my. Oh, Lu. I'm so sorry!" She looked guiltily away.

"Of course I know. Deanna and Ri knew about your potion anyway, and it didn't take them long to work out what it was for. Especially when they saw it in use. You have to get up pretty early to fool Rianne, you know. Don't worry," she reassured her, "I'm too impressed to be angry. Especially now Harry's told me why you did it. You should have asked us for help! We've had experience at that sort of thing, you know."

"I didn't think of that." Hermione admitted. "Besides, I wanted a challenge, you know? I wanted an adventure."

"Figures. Typical Gryffindor." Luella smiled knowingly.

"Who is?" asked Deanna, still engrossed in *Hexing and Counter-Hexing: Intermediate Level*. "Hermione." Luella told her. That caused Deanna to put the book down immediately.

"*Hermione*? What, Granger? Since when has she taken up extreme sports and downing pints in one?" She turned to look at Hermione. "You don't look any different."

"Hermione wanted an adventure, so instead of taking the sensible option and asking for our help in entrapping Malfoy, she does it the hard way and brews up a potion so they can impersonate Slytherins and do it themselves. No doubt breaking half a dozen school rules in the process." Luella explained.

"Oh, so it *was* you!" Deanna laughed. "We thought it might be. Why were you doing it anyway? Gryffindor you might be, but even so, you're hardly the type to go to all that trouble for no reason."

"Spying." said Hermione mysteriously.

"On who?" Deanna asked, curious. Hermione looked around before replying. She beckoned both girls towards her and lowered her voice to a whisper.

"On Malfoy."

"Oh." A pause. "Why?"

"We thought he might be..." Hermione looked around again. "We thought he might be the Heir of Slytherin!"

At those words, Deanna's curiosity vanished as the familiar Slytherin poker-face slammed down across her features.

"I see. Did you get anywhere?" Her voice sounded perfectly innocent to an outside observer, however Luella recognised it at once as her interrogation mode.

Hermione didn't appear to notice anything unusual.

"No. It's not Malfoy anyway. All we got were a load of old legends. Absolutely nothing of any use whatsoever. All that effort for nothing." she sighed.

"Never mind." Deanna consoled her, trying to hide her relief that Luella hadn't been implicated in any way. "It was worth a try. How did you do it anyway? That must have taken some planning."

"Yeah, how did you manage it?" Luella asked, intrigued. "You don't find recipes like that just anywhere."

Hermione once more leaned forward conspiratorially, although this time she couldn't resist a little bragging.

"Well, it was easy really. Lockhart signed the book out of the Restricted Section for us, and I stole the ingredients out of Snape's office."

"You did?" Deanna and Luella both stared at her before exchanging approving looks.

"Blimey. I didn't know you had it in you." commented Luella.

"Yeah, we're impressed. How?"

"I got Harry and Ron to cause a diversion. Harry threw one of Fred and George's fireworks into Goyle's potion. During the resulting chaos, I was able to sneak into his office and grab what we needed." Hermione shook her mane of hair, in a manner that could only be described as cocky. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Damn good." Luella nodded. "You know, that's almost Slytherin in its brilliance." She turned to Deanna. "Why have we never done anything like that?"

"Never had a reason to." Deanna reached for her quill and a piece of parchment. "So, Hermione. Talk me through this again. Firework, potion of unsuspecting stooge, chaos, raid Snape's stuff. That right?"

"That's it." Hermione's bravado turned to disapproval. "Deanna, I hope you're not thinking of using all this for your own twisted entertainment."

"Me? Never." said Deanna, a very picture of innocence. "And you got the book out of the library by lying to Lockhart, yes?"

"I didn't lie to him!" Hermione protested. She noticed the disbelieving looks the two Slytherins were giving her. "Well, maybe I stretched the truth just a little bit." she admitted, shamefaced.

Deanna returned to her note-taking. "Permission slip signed by Lockhart. OK. Difficult was it?"

"No, not really. He barely looked at the slip. I just said I needed it for background reading so I could understand something in one of his books and he signed it straight away. It wasn't hard at all."

"I see." Deanna began scribbling again. "Lockhart will sign virtually anything, especially if charm, flattery and general sucking up are employed. Honesty and sincerity not required, and you cannot overdo the crawling. Got it."

"Deanna, why are you taking all these notes?" Luella asked, peering over her shoulder. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing. But they might come in useful one day." Deanna turned to Marlie. "Hey, Marls. The Restricted Section's ours. Lockhart'll sign anything."

"He gets a lot of autograph requests, Deanna, he has to be flexible in these matters." said Marlie distractedly, still staring ferociously at her as yet untouched parchment. Suddenly it seemed to register with her just what Deanna was getting at. "The Restricted Section, did you say?"

"That's right. The Restricted Section we're barred from. I know how we can get in."

"Really?" Marlie laid down her quill. "How?"

"Simple. In fact, I can't believe I never thought of it before. We ask Lockhart to sign us in. He doesn't know we're banned, and it's the easiest thing in the world to get round him. What do you think?"

Marlie was temporarily rendered speechless. She shook her head in amazement. "That... that's brilliant! Absolutely amazing!" She reached for a piece of parchment, scribbled a note, folded it into a paper aeroplane and sent it flying over to land in front of Rachel Clearwater. The Ravenclaw picked it up and examined it carefully, before giving Marlie a dubious look. However, she opened it and began to read. As she did so, her eyes widened and a gasp of triumph escaped her lips. Nudging her brother in the side, she showed him the note. He read it once, displaying no emotion other than to raise an eyebrow. Looking over to his cousin, he nodded once and set fire to the note with an Incendio Charm before he and his sister returned to their work. Marlie smiled in satisfaction before resuming staring at her blank piece of parchment.

"Would someone like to tell me what that was about?" Rianne asked, looking up from what Luella realised with a shock really was a copy of the *Financial Times*. "We've

found out how to get into the Restricted Section." Deanna explained. "If you bullshit Lockhart sufficiently, you're in. Easy. Hermione managed it and she's a hopeless liar."

"Really?" Rianne raised an eyebrow. "Who would have thought it? Lockhart does have a use after all."

"Rianne!" snapped Marlie. "I told you before, stop making fun of him!"

Rianne rolled her eyes. "Marls, that would sound just a bit more genuine if you hadn't been plotting with your cousins to take advantage of his stupidity in order to gain illicit access to the Restricted Section. And don't deny it, I was reading that note over your shoulder. Your exact words were, and I quote, *I can get us into the R.S. Looks like the Project's back on. Burn this letter. Marls.* What the Project is, I have no idea, but it clearly involves something underhand."

Marlie shifted uneasily. "It isn't! It's just going to involve a fair bit of looking at esoteric tomes, that's all."

"Which just so happen to have lots of curses and dark hexes in them." Rianne pointed out.

"She doesn't need the Restricted Section for that." Deanna indicated the book she'd been reading. "You should check out this book Mum gave me, it's got all sorts of creative ways to make someone suffer."

"Has it now?" Rianne seemed intrigued. "Does it have ways of making it look like an accident too?"

"I think that's the Advanced one."

"Shame. I was thinking maybe we could test them on Lockhart."

"Rianne!" Marlie yelled.

"Alright, alright! I'll stop teasing your precious Gilderoy. Speaking of which, that assignment isn't going to write itself. Hurry up, it's due in Monday and I'm going to need Sunday night with Lu's Dicta-Quill transcribing it."

"I'm trying!" snapped Marlie. "It's not my fault all my creativity went into my forty verse epic saga about Lockhart's defeat of the Killer Boggarts of Bridlington."

"Oh god, you don't mean to tell me you actually bothered writing that one!" said Deanna dismissively. "I couldn't be arsed myself. Right waste of time and he never checks to see who's done their homework anyway. Did you do yours, Lu?"

"I did. Mine was but a humble limerick. I struggled heroically with it for days, then one night, I achieved a breakthrough on realising that Boggart was a pretty good rhyme with Lockhart. All just flowed from there really."

"A limerick?!" Marlie stared in disbelief. "Lu, it's meant to be high poetry, not a crap rhyme! It's meant to be art!"

"Now, now. If you look carefully at the title of the assignment, all he said was to write a poem on his defeat of the Bridlington Boggarts. He never said what sort, did he, Deanna?"

"He didn't say a word on the subject."

"Exactly. A limerick is a poem, is it not?"

"Yes, but..." Marlie tried desperately to search for the valid reason that surely explained why a limerick didn't fulfil the requirements of the assignment, but couldn't for the life of her think of one.

"I rest my case." Luella leaned back, satisfied.

"There you go then, Marls." Deanna advised her. "Do a short one. How about a sonnet? They're short."

"Or a cinquaine." Rianne added. "They're really short."

"He'll think I'm slacking!" moaned Marlie.

"Hey, it's my name going on this, remember! And like Deanna said, he never bothers to keep a record of the marks, so I'm in the clear anyway."

Marlie slammed her quill down. "If that's the case, why are you making me do your homework for you?"

"I like seeing you suffer." Rianne grinned.

"Sadist. However, you have done me one favour. You have removed any obligation I might have had to put any effort into this. Right, Lu. Shortest form of poetry possible, please."

"That'd have to be the haiku. Three lines. Seventeen syllables. No probs."

"A haiku?!" Rianne exploded. "You are not submitting a bloody haiku!!"

"Why on earth not?" Marlie blinked in surprise before assuming her most charming smile. "It's an ancient and venerable Japanese art form. You're not dissing the Japanese are you?"

"No." Rianne muttered.

"Well then." Marlie picked up her quill and set to work. "OK, how's this. Great wizard hero/ faced by his ultimate fear./ He had no problems."

Deanna counted the syllables. "Hey, it fits as well! Yeah, go for that."

"I will." Marlie scribbled the haiku down and passed the parchment to Rianne. "There you go. One assignment, all ready for you to transcribe."

Rianne looked at it. "Pitiful. Just pitiful. Lu, you needn't worry about lending me your Dicta-Quill. I can have this done myself in five minutes."

"It must be nice having a quill that writes your essays for you." Marlie observed.
"Any chance of me having one?"

"Too late." Luella replied. "You've just missed Christmas and your birthday's eleven months away. Anyway, it only writes what you tell it to. You still have to do the work."

"Oh." said Marlie, deflated. However, true to form, it didn't last long. "Lu, I don't suppose there's any way it could be, you know, tweaked, is there? So as to put together an essay all by itself with you just reading out the relevant facts thus saving an awful lot of work."

"I don't think so, Marls."

"Of course you can't, Marls." said Rianne, returning her attention to her *FT*. "It's only a Dicta-Quill. It doesn't have any intelligence of its own. You're talking about something a lot more complicated here. Why, you'd need a Quick-Quotes Quill for that."

"A Quick-Quotes Quill?" Luella asked, bewildered.

"Journalists use them for writing their stories." Deanna told her. "Just feed in the basic facts and it'll produce the perfect tabloid story for you. Cost a fortune though, twenty Galleons or so."

Marlie sighed in despair. "Not even I have that much. Not to spare anyhow. Yes, Malfoy finally paid his debts off, yes I just got a load of other instalments and back payments from half the house, but it's all got to go back into the business, most of it. And the Sweepstake doesn't bring in that much. Damn it, I almost got out of Rianne's Lockhart homework there!"

"Shame." said Rianne. "I would have liked to have seen Lockhart stitched up."

"And me." volunteered Deanna. "Oh, if only we could think of a way to raise twenty Galleons in a hurry!"

"Not much chance of that." sighed Luella. "You'd have to borrow money off half the house to raise that much..." Her voice trailed off as an idea came to her. Looking at her friends, she realised that much the same thought had occurred to them. With one polished move, all four of them put their heads together and began plotting.

"We'll form a Syndicate." said Rianne softly. "Consisting of everyone we can lay hands on. Everyone puts some money into the communal pot, and when we have enough we order a quill."

"Obviously, we'll need a rota." murmured Deanna. "Can't have fights over it after all. But we should be able to make sure everyone gets a fair go."

"And for a small charge, we could let non-Syndicate members have a go too!" breathed Marlie. "Thus making a nice little second income for us all! Or fourth, in my case."

"And once we'd made enough profit out of it, we could invest in another quill, allowing us to hire it out to several people at a time. Or keep one for Syndicate use and one for non-members." mused Luella.

"Of course, we'll have to limit membership." said Rianne. "Or we'll end up paying out far more money than we're getting in. Plus it means we won't have to pay out so much in dividends."

"We should probably arrange for weekly payouts." Deanna suggested. "We take all the money we've made each week, put half in the communal funds and split the rest between Syndicate members. Before long, we'll have made quite a nice little profit!"

"But even if we don't," grinned Luella, "we will be getting our homework in Defence Against the Dark Arts done and thus have a lot more time to ourselves. And we get to wind up Lockhart, which is something worth paying for, I think."

"All we need now is Syndicate members." said Marlie thoughtfully. "Plus someone to do the accounting. Someone good with numbers. Someone reliable. Someone we can trust. Someone relatively neutral and not a Slytherin."

"And who do you suggest?" asked Deanna.

Marlie just smiled. "I know just the man. Hey! Pauly!" she called across the table. Her cousin looked up.

"What?"

"Come here. I've got a proposition to put to you."

Intrigued, Paul Clearwater got to his feet. Rachel, sensing a good business opportunity when she heard it, followed him over.

"Pauly, you're good with numbers aren't you?" purred Marlie.

Paul exchanged looks with his sister. "Yes." he said, on guard.

"Well, I'm launching a new business and I was wondering if you could do the accounts for us. Seeing as quite a few people will be investing and all, we need a honest, reliable and above all, neutral person to do it."

"And you picked me. How thoughtful. Although I can quite see how you might have trouble finding someone honest and trustworthy in your house." Paul pulled up a seat

in one fluid movement, apparently interested despite the sarcasm. "So what's involved and what do I get out of this?"

"A share of the profits." Marlie promised him. "Listen, this is what we're planning." She filled him and Rachel in on their new venture. Both twins listened in awe.

"I want in." said Rachel as soon as Marlie had finished. "How much do you want?"

"Erm..." Marlie turned to Rianne. "How much should we charge?"

"Galleon each as a minimum. More if they've got it. We're trying to get twenty Galleons for our first quill, and we don't want too large a Syndicate."

The twins reached for their money bags, and before long, four Galleons were resting on the table.

"We're feeling generous." Rachel explained.

"Much obliged to you." said Deanna, reaching for parchment and quill. "Right, so that's the four of us, the Clearwater twins, who else should we ask?"

"I'm free, Tyler." came a familiar voice. Turning round, Deanna found herself face to face with Draco, flanked as usual by Crabbe and Goyle. And on the table behind was Pansy Parkinson with Blaise Zabini and Millicent Bulstrode, all looking very interested indeed.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped.

"Want? I want to know what you're planning now. Plus I was irresistibly drawn by the sweet sound of Galleons." Draco pulled up a chair. "What gives, Tyler?"

Deanna exchanged looks with her friends. "Should we tell him?"

"Don't see why not." said Rianne. "After all, he's got plenty of cash to invest and he's far less likely to shop us if he's implicated too. Sign them all up, we could do with the money."

"OK. But I'm not entirely happy about this." Deanna briefly explained what would be involved. All the second years seemed impressed.

"Ingenious." murmured Draco. "Getting my work done in half the time is worth the price on its own. But am I likely to see any of my money again?"

"Maybe. We're planning to hire it out to non-members and share out half the week's takings with all the members."

"I see. And how much would it cost to hire this quill of yours?"

Deanna turned to Rianne. "Well?"

"Three and ten a night?" Rianne turned to Paul for his opinion. He nodded his head in agreement.

"There you go then, Malfoy. Three and ten a night." said Deanna.

"As opposed to a Galleon to join." Draco turned to Pansy. "Sound good to you?"

"Too right!" she laughed. "Put my name down."

"And ours!" cried Blaise and Millicent.

"Let's see your money then." Deanna was answered with three golden coins and what proved to be another two Galleons in Sickles. Blaise just shrugged.

"I had some change to get rid of. What?"

"Nothing, Blaise, nothing." sighed Deanna. "Anyone got a moneybag?"

Marlie produced some blotting paper and her wand. One tap later and a spare moneybag was on its way to Paul, busy counting up all the loose change. Meanwhile, Luella was adding Pansy, Millicent and Blaises' names to the list of members.

"Hey, that's nine in as many minutes. Not bad!" She looked up at Malfoy. "You three made your minds up yet?"

Goyle promptly thrust a handful of coins at her. Draco made a point of deliberately pausing before oh-so-casually letting a handful of Galleons fall onto the table.

Which just left Crabbe.

"Well?" Luella asked him. He didn't reply, just sneered at her. Luella guessed at once what he was thinking. The taboo word *Mudblood* hung tangibly in the air. But it wasn't the only one.

Pay up, you bastard. The Glamour was done before Luella even knew it. And before Crabbe fully registered what was going on, he'd dug into his pockets and presented her with no less than three Galleons. Luella took them with a smile and passed them to Paul.

"Thank you, Crabbe. Welcome to the Syndicate." She smiled with satisfaction as she watched him realise what he'd just done. Snarling with a rage that was no less dangerous for its impotence, he turned tail and stalked away.

"What's up with him?" Pansy asked, confused.

Draco shrugged. "Who knows. He'll change his tune when the profits start rolling in though. See you around, Tyler. Nice doing business with you." He inclined his head in the briefest of nods and left, followed by Goyle. Pansy and her friends, deciding that the excitement had passed, returned to doing their work.

"Now that was a lucrative ten minutes, wasn't it?" Deanna turned to Paul. "How much have we got?"

"Seventeen Galleons, once you four have contributed."

"Hey, that's not bad. We might even be able to close off the membership there. Best order the quill now, Marls."

Marlie opened her mouth to reply but found herself interrupted as Lydia Vetinari's strident tones echoed across the table.

"Oh no you don't! We heard every word of what you're planning, and we want a part of it!" The first year's eyes flashed dangerously, in a manner that clearly indicated that rejection was not an option.

"Yeah." chimed in Autumn. "Why should you guys have all the fun? Not to mention the profits. I hate doing Lockhart assignments. You have no idea how hard it is to think up synonyms for 'heroic' and 'wonderful' after a while."

"Oh believe me, Autumn, we do." said Rianne grimly.

"Like you'd know." came a dark mutter from Marlie's direction. Rianne just smiled to herself. Looked like Marlie was finally being cured of her Lockhart obsession. Work had a way of turning her off things. One day, Marlie would look back and see that it was for her own good. Well, maybe.

"Well, Rianne? Shall we recruit them?" Deanna was interrupting her train of thought.

"Go on then. We've still got room for a few more people."

"Right you are. Come on then, let's see your gold." Deanna held out her hand. Lydia and Autumn promptly paid up. Ginny, however, didn't move. She just sat there, biting her lip anxiously. It didn't go unnoticed.

"Come on then, Gin, pay up. What's the matter, don't you want to be in the Syndicate?" Autumn asked, amazed that Ginny still had scruples over this sort of thing after four months in Slytherin.

"It's not that." Ginny whispered. "It's just that..." She hung her head in shame, embarrassed that her Achilles heel was being so publicly needled. "I don't have a Galleon." There. It was done. The old shame at being poor was out in the open. Great, just what she needed. She'd join Slytherin to get away from it, and now here it was again, reminding her once more that she wasn't really on equal terms at all, just tagging along after the rich kids. Shoved out of the good life because she couldn't afford it. And just when she thought she was settling in. Trying not to cry, she braced herself for the inevitable snide comment from Lydia.

Which was why she got the shock of her life when Lydia actually did speak.

"No problem. I'll pay your share. Here, Deanna. One Galleon on Gin's behalf." She flipped another golden coin towards the fourth years.

"What? Lydia, you don't have to do that!" Ginny gasped.

"Yes I do. I'm not having you miss out on all the excitement just because your parents don't have any initiative of their own. You can pay me back when the dividends start rolling in."

"Oh!" Ginny was at a loss for words. "I... Thank you! But... Lydia... Are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure!" The other girl smiled, green eyes flashing with kindness this time. "Don't feel bad about it. Lots of Slytherins have to borrow money initially. Nothing to be ashamed of."

"Thank you!" Ginny whispered. "How can I ever repay you?"

"In cash. When the first payout comes through." came the reply. Ginny felt her embarrassment melt away. After all, every businessmage had to borrow money to start off with. It was just a start-up loan, and she couldn't have wished for easier terms.

"I will. You can count on it." she promised.

However, not everyone at the table was so keen on the idea. Hermione was glaring at Luella in particular in a way that reminded her unnervingly of her mother. Luella felt herself tensing, expecting her mother's voice to ring out across the library, the dread words "Luella Angelica Martin, what have you done now?" forming their usual precursor to punishment. While Hermione did not actually say she disapproved, it wasn't a particularly difficult message to work out. Even the not normally that perceptive Deanna noticed.

"You alright there, Hermione? You look a bit upset. Anything the matter?"

"As a matter of fact there is." The iciness in Hermione's voice could have made a Slytherin wince, and did. "What do you think you're doing, cheating at your homework like that? And making money out of it too? I don't believe you lot, I really don't!" the Gryffindor fumed at them.

"It's not cheating!" Deanna protested. "It's just... getting some creative assistance with our work, that's all."

"Creative?" shrieked Hermione. "You're getting the quill to write all your assignments for you!"

"Not all of them." Rianne put in. "Just the pointless Lockhart ones."

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "They're not pointless! They're very important! You could be missing out on some vital piece of anti-Dark Arts knowledge!"

"Not likely, not with my mother around." Deanna indicated the tome in front of her.
"This book alone's got more hexes and counter-charms than everything we've learnt in
the past four years. A couple of hours spent with this is more profitable than a whole
year of Lockhart's lessons."

"But not as profitable as the Syndicate's going to be." Marlie added. This had the
effect of rousing Hermione's anger even more than it already was.

"So not only do you have to indulge your own laziness, you have to drag everyone
else into it as well? All just to line your own pockets! Disgusting!"

Marlie looked blankly at her. "Why? We're not ripping anyone off."

"That is not the point!" Hermione hissed. "It's wrong. You shouldn't be encouraging
everyone to break the rules."

"Hey, we're just hiring it out. What they do with it afterwards is up to them." Rianne
turned to Marlie. "You know, I think we just had an insight into why all the wealthiest
magical families are Slytherin."

"Oh!" seethed Hermione. "I'm beginning to wonder if Ron isn't right about you lot.
Especially you, Luella! I thought you of all people were better than that!"

Luella squirmed. "Well, yes, but I could do with the cash, and it is Lockhart after all."

"There you go again! Criticising Professor Lockhart, after all the hard work and
dedication he puts into teaching us! Ron always picks on him too, everyone seems to!
Well, I'm sick of it! And I'm putting a stop to this right now. I'm going to see
Professor McGonagall and tell her exactly what you're up to." She got up and began
to storm out of the library.

The four Slytherins looked at each other in horror. Their plan looked like it would be
over before it had even begun.

Deanna turned to Luella. "Do something!" she whispered.

Easier said than done. Luella hadn't got a clue what to do. However, fortunately for
her, Harry and Ron chose that precise moment to put in an entrance.

"There you are, Mione!" laughed Harry as he spotted her. "We thought we might find
you here."

Ron raised an eyebrow. "Hermione? In a library? Surely not." He turned back to her.
"Good to see you presentable again, mate." He took in Hermione's livid appearance.
"What's up?"

"Those four!" snapped Hermione. "They're planning this grand scheme to get their
Defence Against the Dark Arts homework done for them and make money out of it at
the same time."

"Really?" Both boys looked highly impressed. "Tell us more!"

It dawned on Luella how she could get Hermione to keep quiet. Bribery was out, but Hermione was the last person to get her friends in trouble. She made her way over.

"We're putting together a Syndicate. Everyone puts in a Galleon and when we have enough, we're buying an enchanted quill that will write our Lockhart assignments for us. We're going to hire it out to non-members too and split the proceeds between us. Want in? There's still spaces."

"You bet!" Harry reached for his money bag and produced a golden Galleon. "Sign me up right now!"

"Will do." Luella smiled. She turned to Ron. "What about you?"

Ron's enthusiasm had died as soon as Luella had mentioned the entry fee. "I think I'll pass, thanks."

Luella could have smacked herself. Of course. If Ginny needed to borrow money to join, Ron certainly would have to. She cursed herself for not having realised.

Harry had also guessed why the change of heart. "Hey Ron, I can pay your share if you like."

"It's alright, Harry. I don't need your charity." snapped Ron, trying and failing not to sound bitter.

Typical Gryffindor, thought Luella. Always taking pride in their poverty and refusing all aid. Honestly, it's just a business deal. Just a business deal...

"The Syndicate will loan you the money." said Luella, inspiration dawning. "We've got excess funds anyway, some of our members were quite generous. It's really quite amazing, as soon as we mentioned the prospect of profits and not having to do Lockhart homework, everyone seemed to just start flinging money at us. We'll take it out of your payouts. No interest either. Sound good?"

Ron gaped. "You'd really let me join for free?" His eyes narrowed. "Look, I don't want any special treatment, alright? I don't want you feeling sorry for me."

"You're not joining for free. You're borrowing off us. It's a business deal. Are you interested or not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I am." said Ron, dazed. "Look, are you sure about this? Especially the no interest bit. I feel like I should work for it."

"Why? None of us are. That's kind of the idea, to get out of doing work. Why, do you want to pay interest?"

"No, no, not at all, that's quite alright." said Ron hastily.

"Good. That's settled then." Luella said briskly. She turned round and called to Deanna. "Deanna! Harry and Ron have joined."

"Nice one!" Deanna called back. "I'll add their names."

Hermione could only stare open-mouthed as Deanna scribbled on a piece of parchment that was obviously the members' list. She'd been well and truly outwitted. She could hardly go to McGonagall now, not with her two best friends implicated. They were on their last chance as it was, if they got in trouble again, they'd be expelled. There was absolutely nothing she could do except glare silently at Luella, who just smiled sweetly back at her.

"What about you, Hermione? Interested?"

"No." snapped Hermione. "I want no part in this." She turned to her friends. "You get involved if you have to. But don't come running to me when you get found out!" She flounced back to the table and sat down, burying her head in her books.

"She doesn't really approve." Luella explained. "Thinks we're going to be missing out on all sorts of vital anti-Dark Arts knowledge."

"The only thing we'll be missing out on is having to think up two words that rhyme with 'Gilderoy'." snorted Ron. "Tell you what, Harry, limericks are a damn sight harder than they look."

"You did limericks as well, did you?" laughed Luella. "Same here. Try rhyming 'Boggart' and 'Lockhart'."

"He did that last time." grinned Harry as the three of them made their way over to the table. "Now he's stuck for ideas. Tell you what, Lu, we may not be learning much about defending ourselves, but I'm discovering a new form of poetry every week, it's great!"

"Which is all very well until your back's against the wall." said Ron as he sat down next to Hermione. "Can't see very many Dark mages being put off by your ability to compose sonnets off the cuff."

"Oh I don't know." mused Luella. "If you offered to do one about them, they might take you on as their personal bard."

"Now there's a nice, safe lifestyle." commented Ron. "Your whole survival hinging on your ability to suck up to a certified evil git and make it rhyme too. I think learning how to hex is a better guarantee of survival than poetry, eh Harry? And talking of which, what is your mate Tyler reading?" He indicated Deanna's book.

"Her mum sent it to her. Wants her to learn something useful this year." Luella told him.

"Her *mum*???" Ron's jaw dropped in shock. "Sent her that? But that's practically a Dark arts manual. My mum wouldn't let any of us near a book like that!"

"Knowing Fred and George, I'm not surprised." said Harry.

"Well, Deanna's mother obviously has a higher opinion of her maturity than your mum has of yours." Luella said, just a little testily.

"Well, I just hope none of your housemates gets hold of it." said Ron nervously.
"Although knowing you lot, most of you probably have access to far worse. Like that thing Stormosi's got, with all those weird and esoteric tables on the back. Freaky. Gods know what that's intended for. Probably some demonic grimoire designed to smite your enemies and traffick with the denizens of hell."

"Ron," Harry pointed out. "it's the *Financial Times*. It's a perfectly normal Muggle newspaper and those tables are share prices." He blinked as this fact sunk in. "Erm, Lu, what's she doing with the *FT*?"

"An excellent point. Ri, what are you doing with the *FT*?" Luella had been wondering why Rianne had a copy all morning, and was dying to satisfy her curiosity.

"Tracking my share portfolio. What else would I be doing with a *Financial Times*?"

"Oh. Right." It took a few minutes for it to sink in. "Hang on. A share portfolio??"

"Yes." Rianne laid down her newspaper and looked up with a slightly condescending smile. "What? You never heard of a pure-blood playing the stock exchange before?"

Luella and Ron both shook their heads.

"No." said Luella. "Most of them think FT-SE's something you play on a first date."

"What's a stock exchange?" asked Ron, bewildered.

"A stock exchange, Weasley, is where you can buy a share in any listed business of your choice." Rianne explained. "In effect, you get to own part of it. Depending on how the business does, it will either increase or decrease in value. Should it become worth a lot more than what you paid for it, you can sell it and make a fortune. Which is what I'm going to attempt. It's really very interesting, Luella's dad told me all about it over the summer."

Ron blinked, dazed by all this information. "Riiight.... What happens if the business in question doesn't do very well?"

"The share price falls and you lose money."

"Oh. Sounds a bit risky to me. You could lose a fortune doing that."

"But you could also make one." smiled Rianne. "You have to take risks sometimes, Weasley. Surely a Gryffindor can understand that?"

"That's different!" Ron protested. "I don't know how, but it just is."

"Are you making anything out of it?" Harry asked.

"Enough. Let's just say I won't be relying on hand-outs from my relatives anymore."

The admission that there was money to be made out of this little venture seemed to rouse interest in the most unlikely of quarters. Both Deanna and Marlie dropped what they were doing and looked up.

"Won't you?" asked Marlie in surprise. "Blimey, has your dad won the pools or something?"

"Hardly. And no, no one's died and left me anything. I'm exploring the world of high finance."

"Oh." Marlie's enthusiasm died away. "That's not very interesting."

"It doesn't have to be." Rianne told her. "It's profitable. That's all that matters. Although I will admit that it does exert a certain fascination."

Marlie peered over her shoulder and stared at the tables before her. No matter how hard she tried, all she could make out were names and numbers more confusing than an Advanced Arithmancy text. Nothing really fascinating, nothing like the entrancing interplay of wires and circuits and electricity and colour co-ordinated fascias that went into designing a Walkmage.

"Just looks like numbers to me, Ri."

"Numbers, as you would know if you'd bothered taking Arithmancy, are the building blocks of the universe, Marlie. And these will make my fortune."

"Will they now." Deanna, by contrast, sounded intrigued. "Ri... I don't suppose... there's any chance... I mean, Mum set this Junior Gringotts account up for me with 100 Galleons in it, and..."

"You want to have a go, is that right?" sighed Rianne.

Deanna nodded. "Please?"

"Oh go on then. Pick a couple of companies out and I'll put some cash on for you."

"Yay! Thanks, Ri!" Deanna perused the listings and circled some names, before passing the paper back to Rianne. The Slytherin took one look and raised an eyebrow.

"You sure about that, Deanna?"

"Yes. Why, shouldn't I be?" Deanna asked, a little wary. "They're good companies, aren't they?"

"Well, yes, but I just have a bad feeling about them, that's all."

"You worry too much, Ri. Fifty Galleons on each please."

Rianne just looked at her friend. "You're willing to risk your entire savings?"

"Why not? After all there's money to be made here!"

"There's also a lot to be lost, Deanna." Rianne reminded her. "Tell you what, I'll put twenty each, and if all goes well, you can put invest some more. Deal?"

"Deal!" Deanna produced her Junior Gringotts chequebook and wrote Rianne a cheque for forty Galleons. Rianne took it from her and calmly pocketed it.

Ron could only watch in jealousy. "Wish I had a Junior Gringotts account." he muttered.

"Never mind, Weasley." said Rianne. "Maybe your dad'll come into some money and get you one of these days."

"Doubt it." sighed Ron. "Whatever he gets won't go very far between seven of us. Besides, Mum reckons that only spoilt rich kids need Junior Gringotts accounts."

"Bet Malfoy's got one." said Harry, trying to cheer Ron up.

"He has." Ginny piped up. "In fact, not only has he got a Junior Gringotts account, I think he's got his own Gringotts card."

"A Gringotts card?" Deanna shrieked. "How'd he get that?? My mum won't let me anywhere near one. Reckons I'd run up debts."

"Or gamble it on the FT-SE." Luella observed. Deanna ignored her.

"Bloody hell, a Gringotts card, can you believe it?" she muttered. "His dad spoils him rotten. Can you believe it? Wonder what his credit limit is."

"Too much." Ron sulked. "Git." He turned back to Rianne. "So, this footsie thing..."

"FT-SE." Rianne corrected. "Stands for Financial Times Stock Exchange. What about it?"

"Whatever." Ron shrugged. "How do you go about investing?"

"Well, my dad's Squib cousin Luciano Stormosi works in the City, and he puts the money on for me. Why, you thinking of having a go?"

"Maybe." muttered Ron.

Rianne just laughed. "Weasley, you've got to have some money to invest before you can start. And it's not something you can get loans for, y'know?"

"How'd you get yours then?" snapped Ron. "And don't tell me you've got a trust fund - your dad's on the same salary as mine."

"Dad won a not inconsiderable amount on the dogs, and seeing as I suggested the winner to him, he let me have half. That's how, Weasley."

"The dogs?" Ron sneered. "Blimey, Stormosi, are your entire family incurable gamblers?"

"No." snapped Rianne. "It was a one-off. Just now and then my dad likes a bit of a flutter. Can we drop it?" Please, she thought. Before the truth behind the words 'now and then' and 'a bit of a flutter' got exposed for what they were. It had been a one-off though. For her anyway. Long gone were the days when her father had taken her along to race courses and casinos as his 'lucky mascot'. Of course, also long gone were the days when there'd been money to burn, but even Rianne had principles. Don't think about it, she told herself. In the past now, except when she needed cash in a hurry of course. Ignoring the protestations of what passed for a conscience, she got to her feet, grateful for the sound of the lunch bell.

"Come on." she said roughly, gathering up her things. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

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Chapter Eighteen Big Pink Balloons and a Troupe of Performing Midgets

"So how long have you been wheeling and dealing in the world of high finance then, Ri?" Deanna asked as they made their way towards the Great Hall. Ginny, Lydia and Autumn had already disappeared, as had the Clearwaters, who were even now discussing the possibility of playing the stock market themselves and using Arithmantic formulae to improve their chances. Harry and Ron were also well ahead now, although Hermione was hanging back, clearly not having forgiven them for betraying Lockhart yet.

"Since October." Rianne replied. "I mean, Luella's dad told me all about it after he found me puzzling over his *Financial Times* during the summer. And I sort of had an idea that I could make money out of this. So, after talking my dad into winning some money for me, I had a word with Cousin Luce who was so stunned at my audacity he agreed to invest it for me. And it's done so well he's decided to stick with it. I'm letting him take a cut, naturally."

"Naturally." mused Deanna. "But Ri, you don't mind me asking just one question, right? Share prices can go down as well as up, right?"

"That's the general idea, yes."

"So... how have you managed to make rather a lot of money out of it? Have you lost any? And then there's the gambling in order to raise the capital. How do you do it?"

Rianne just shrugged. "I'm just lucky I guess. Although the stock market investments were made on the basis of a long and careful assessment of market trends, company performance and intuition."

Deanna, apparently pacified, said no more on the subject. However, Luella couldn't help noticing a certain look in Rianne's eyes, as if there were a little more to it than that. She didn't get the chance to mention it though. Marlie was speaking now.

"I still think you're a jammy git, Stormosi. Very cunning though. You must be Machiavelli reincarnate." Envious though she was, Marlie was impressed enough not be bothered by it.

Luella was reminded why she'd sought Deanna out that morning in the first place. "So you guys really believe in reincarnation then."

"Oh yeah." Marlie nodded. "Mum wouldn't lie to me about that. She reckons that's why we have Muggle-borns - they're mage souls born to Muggle families, although apparently Muggle souls can become mages over time. Don't know how though."

"Development of psychic abilities, right-brain thinking, an ascetic lifestyle and involvement in either the Muggle occult, religion or some other form of self-development during a Muggle life. That's how." Rianne told her. "Progress far enough and the soul will pick up magical abilities. Once you've got them, however basic, you'll be a mage. And you can then develop them over more lives. It does help incarnating into a mage family though because you then have genetics and upbringing giving you a hand."

"Ooh. Fascinating. Hang on though." Deanna noted a snag in Rianne's reasoning. "An ascetic lifestyle? By that logic, Marlie should be a Squib by now."

"Tyler!" yelled Marlie.

"I think you only need that in order to become one. Once you've got your powers, you can live how you like, you're unlikely to lose them. Which also accounts for the Malfoys, I believe." Rianne gazed off into the middle distance.

"A mage could incarnate into a Muggle family then." said Luella, trying to get the conversation back on track.

"Oh yes. Why do you ask?" Rianne returned her attention to Luella, cool brown eyes now lazily drawing information from her friend.

"Because I know who I was. And Deanna too."

"Yeah?" All three of them turned round to look at her now, their interest well and truly caught.

"How?" asked Marlie.

"Yeah, and who the hell were we then? Not Malfoys I hope!" The disapproval did not mask the curiosity.

"Course not. We were twin sisters. Our mother was a Muggle-born witch. I don't know who our father was, but our mother is my great-aunt this time around. We were called Diana and Louise. You were an Auror."

"I was?" Deanna blinked in surprise. "Was I any good?"

"I think you were. You got killed in action though."

Deanna shrugged. "These things happen. Voldie then, I take it."

Luella nodded. Deanna digested the information, before a smile began to spread across her features. "I was an Auror! Cool!" The euphoria faded a little, leaving a look of thoughtfulness. "I wonder if Mum knew her. They must have been serving together at the same time, if it was during the Reign of Terror."

"What were you doing, Lu?" Rianne asked.

At this, Luella felt her enthusiasm die away. "I got married." she said simply.

"Who to? Anyone famous?"

"My school sweetheart. He was an Auror too."

"Oh. Right." Rianne's interest began to fade away. "So you were the same age as Tyler then?"

"Yeah. We were twins. She was Slytherin, I was Ravenclaw."

"Figures." snorted Marlie.

Deanna looked at Luella, a deep, searching look that seemed almost as if she was seeing her for the first time. Luella began to feel uncomfortable under such intense scrutiny, but she didn't look away. It was only Deanna, after all. And yet, she'd never felt anything like this degree of intimacy. Deanna just smiled, reaching out to touch her cheek.

"It explains a lot." she whispered. "Explains a hell of a lot... sister."

Silence. Just those dark eyes holding her prisoner. And in that moment, Luella could almost see Deanna as she'd been back then, clear blue eyes and silken brown hair curling around a face that, while different, wasn't that different. It was like Luella's own, but with a certain hardness that hers lacked, with sharper features and an uncompromising cast that indicated that this was the twin you didn't mess about with. No change there then. And another thing that hadn't changed was the rush of love Luella felt looking at her, a feeling of warmth and safety, a feeling that as long as her

beloved friend and sister was here, nothing could touch her, nothing could hurt her, that all was well with the world...

And then came Hermione's voice, slicing through the ties that bound them, releasing both from their trance.

"Don't you think that's all just a bit unlikely?"

Luella started, blinking from the shock of being transported back into the real world. The sudden bursting of their private bubble had left her too disorientated to react. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of Deanna, who was less than pleased. Turning to face this obstinate second year who had dared to intrude on her privacy, tenderness had boiled over into rage.

"And what, *Granger*, does it have to do with you?" The use of the surname said everything you needed to know about the level of intimacy Deanna was prepared to extend to the young Gryffindor. However, brave to the last, Hermione didn't falter, despite being on the receiving end of a look that would have caused anyone else to turn tail and run while they still had their limbs and faculties intact.

"Just that isn't it a bit unlikely for you both to be born as sisters, conveniently die at the same time, then just *decide* to come back as two fourteen year old best mates? Come on, there's a lot of chance involved here, isn't there? That's if the phenomena actually exists at all, and you two aren't completely deluded."

"Hermione," Luella had by this time recovered her composure and felt personally insulted that her integrity was being brought into question. "I 'saw' my own death. In such detail that when I described it to someone who'd actually been there, she was stunned at how I could possibly have known. I know I'll never prove it to your satisfaction, but I believe it."

"Are you calling my friend a liar?" Deanna's temper was under control but only just, and Luella could see the fingers of her left hand curling into a dueller's grip.

"No..." said Hermione, uncertainty beginning to damp down her courage. Hermione was no fool and recognised the signs clearly enough. Deanna could have her wand out and a curse flying her way in less time than it took to breathe. Time to be diplomatic. "Just that she might be mistaken."

"Well, she's not." Deanna snarled at her. "Deal with it."

"It doesn't rely on chance though, does it?" came Rianne's rather calmer tones. "Of course Deanna and Lu are mates this time around. They knew each other before and like each other for precisely that reason. Chances are they chose to incarnate together once more for reasons we can only speculate on. They didn't find each other again by chance, it was almost certainly planned on. As for them conveniently dying, you forgot that one was an Auror and one married to an Auror, and this during the Reign of Terror. Their dying isn't a fluke, it's a near inevitability."

"Well... I suppose so..." Hermione didn't seem anything as sure of herself as she had done before.

"Tell you what, Hermione, why don't I explain the entire theory of the mage afterlife to you on the way to lunch?" offered Rianne.

"Erm... OK." Hermione was always open to learning new things and if it meant not having Deanna glaring at her, so much the better. Smiling, Rianne led her off, explaining about the three-fold nature of humanity and other esoteric subjects.

Marlie coughed delicately. "Er... I might leave you two to it myself. I need to talk to Rachel about something. See you both!" She raced off towards the Great Hall.

Leaving the two of them standing there alone.

"Look, Deanna, I'm really sorry about that. I didn't know she was listening, or I'd have said later." Luella began.

Deanna dismissed her attempt at apology. "Don't worry. Not your fault Granger's a nosy cow with nothing better to do than intervene in private conversations. Gods, but she's begging for a hexing, and one of these days she's going to get one if she does it again. Now. Where were we?" Reaching out, she pulled Luella into her arms and hugged her. "You know, don't you, that whatever happens, doesn't matter what, you can rely on me, don't you? I mean, I'm not going to abandon you or anything. Not before and certainly not now."

"I know." Luella whispered. "I know." She returned the embrace.

"Good." Deanna let her go. "Come on. Let's go to lunch."

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"Reckon she'll be talking to us yet?" Harry asked Ron as they settled down to their sandwiches.

"Doubt it." replied Ron, seemingly unbothered by the fact. "You know what she's like about Lockhart. Give it a few days or so."

"All the same, it was pretty low." Harry fidgeted with his glass of apple juice, starting to feel guilty at the way they'd treated Hermione. "She's convinced the Syndicate's morally wrong and then we go and join it. I wonder if we did the right thing."

"Harry, give it a rest." Ron reached for another sausage roll. "This Syndicate's a great idea. We need never do any of Lockhart's homework again, and we get to make some money out of it. Harry, it has no flaws. It is perfect. Don't worry about Hermione, you know what she's like about breaking rules."

"She didn't seem to mind about the rules before Christmas." Harry pointedly reminded him.

"Yeah, but that was different. That had a high and noble purpose. This is purely to make money and stitch up her favourite teacher in the process. Course she's going to disapprove. She's a girl, isn't she? They're like that. Well," he corrected himself, "our girls are. Slytherin girls don't seem to be, not when there's cash involved anyway."

"Is that a good thing or not?" Harry asked, curious.

"It can be. Suppose it'd be nice to be able to plan things without having someone protest that that's against the rules. As long as all that corruption and plotting isn't directed at me."

"Oh, so corruption's OK as long as you're benefiting?" Harry teased.

"Yes, I mean no, I mean don't be silly, Harry, of course I'm not corrupt, and anyway you joined the Syndicate before I did."

"Only because you didn't have the money."

"Give it a month or so and I will!" Ron leaned back in his chair, smiling contentedly. "God, Harry, it's going to be brilliant, finally having some money at last! I'll actually be able to wear clothes that have never been worn by anyone else before, and buy all sorts of stuff that I don't need and don't really want but buy anyway just because I can. Malfoy'll never be able to pick on me again! Won't it be great?"

"Bear in mind he's probably a Syndicate member too." Harry warned him. "He is Marlie Lovegood's cousin after all, I expect she's asked him."

"Harry, don't ruin the moment here. Let me dream." sighed Ron.

"OK, OK. So, Ron. May I take it your attitude towards Slytherins has mellowed a little then?"

"Well... maybe." Ron admitted. "They're not so bad. Not all of them. If you keep them where you can see them, keep one hand on your wand at all times, don't eat or drink anything they offer you, and don't lend them any money you'd like to see back again. They do come up with some cool ideas. Some of them I almost respect. Tyler, for example."

"What, Lu's mate?" Harry asked, without thinking.

"Yes, of course Luella Martin's mate. How many other Tylers are there in Slytherin?" snapped Ron. "You know, if, and this is a very big if, I needed to put my trust in a Slytherin, it would be Tyler. She's honest, you know? You know where you are with her. She'd never try to stab you in the back or anything. Admittedly, that's because she'd usually be far too busy hexing you to death from the front, but even then at least you couldn't say you weren't warned. If she doesn't like you, you'll know about it. I wouldn't say I liked her exactly, but I don't despise her either."

"So if not all Slytherins are baby dark mages, does this mean you're going to start talking to Ginny again?" Harry asked, Ron's newfound respect for certain Slytherins

being too good an opportunity to waste. Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if Ron's charity extended that far. He clammed up at once, cold, icy and oddly reminiscent of Percy.

"Ginny's made it quite clear where she stands on the subject. She no longer wants to talk to me. So be it. I won't talk to her. End of story."

Harry rolled his eyes in despair, fighting the urge to grab Ron by the robes and scream at him to stop being so childish. Yes, Ginny had said some pretty hurtful things, but nothing Ron hadn't deserved. Fortunately, Harry was saved having to put any more pressure on his self-control by Hermione's arrival.

"Hi, Hermi." said Ron, brightening up almost immediately. "How's things?"

Hermione appeared to have quite forgotten about the Syndicate. "Cool! I've just been talking to Rianne Stormosi about reincarnation, it's a fascinating subject! Did you know that we've got three bits making us up, the body, soul and spirit? The body's the home of all our animal instincts, physical urges and intuition, the soul's the home of the conscious mind, and the spirit's our higher self that guides us through life. The spirit's also the bit that reincarnates - after we die, the soul transfers everything it's learnt and felt and experienced over to the spirit before fading away. And the spirit remembers it all and uses it to plan its next life, but because it's getting all the memories second-hand, it isn't so attached to them and so is able to take a more charitable view of things."

"Harry, make her stop." Ron groaned. "Please."

Hermione ignored him. "And because when we're alive we think from our souls, we don't recall anything about what went before. We only find out if the spirit decides it's the right time for us to know. And if we do remember, we're not so bothered because it didn't happen to our current soul. But we can recognise people we knew before because chances are our respective spirits arranged it and because our spirits will have been in touch during our past lives too."

"Harry, *please*." Ron pleaded.

"And then there's how it all ties into evolution-

"Hermione." Harry interrupted. Interesting as the subject was, Ron looked like he was seriously considering spontaneously combusting in order to get away from Hermione's lecture, and Harry felt it was time he stepped in and helped him. Besides, he did have something he needed to talk to her about, after all. "Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure! Go ahead." smiled Hermione. It seemed they'd caught her in a Sharing of Knowledge Mood, although to be honest, Hermione seemed to spend most of her life feeling that way.

"I was wondering if you had any thoughts on this." He produced the diary. Hermione took it from him and flicked through it.

"1943?" she asked, frowning. "What's a 1943 diary doing in 1993 Hogwarts? Has Snape opened up a hole in the space-time continuum or something?"

"Wouldn't put it past him." muttered Ron.

"No, I don't think so." Harry told her. "But think about the date. What happened fifty years ago?"

There was a pause as Hermione took a few seconds to work out why fifty years was significant. Then the penny dropped. "This diary might hold some clues as to who opened the chamber first time around!" Hermione gasped in delight, her mind racing swiftly from one logical step to the next. "And if we know that, we can work out who's doing it now! Brilliant, Harry, brilliant!"

"Just one snag." Ron pointed out. "It's blank."

"Doesn't mean a thing." said Hermione dismissively. "There's all sorts of ways of making text invisible. Oh Harry, we've got to get back to the common room, start experimenting! Who knows what we might find out? We should check out the library too, see if there's any charms in there."

"Oh wonderful." muttered Ron. "More time in the library. What fun."

"Oh Ron, stop being such a philistine." Hermione told him. "Books are good for you."

"According to my mum, sprouts are good for me, but I've yet to see any evidence." replied Ron. Hermione glared at him and what promised to be a heated argument looked about to break out, until it was rudely interrupted by a cry of "Trevor!"

The three Gryffindors watched as Neville's toad Trevor leapt onto the table, sitting in the midst of the plates and serving dishes, blinking innocuously as he looked around. Then Neville arrived on the scene, flushed and out of breath.

"There you are, Trevor, I've been looking all over for you!" he cried. "Don't mind me, Harry, I'll be out of your way in a minute- aaahhh!!" Once again, Neville's clumsiness had got the better of him. The edge of his robe somehow managed to get caught under his foot and Neville ended up sprawling across the table, sending food in all directions, plates about three inches into the air, and Ron's glass of red grape juice toppling over. Right over the diary.

Harry made to snatch it out of harm's way, but it was too late. The little book was dripping wet, and was now likely to have some lovely red stains as well. Great. Just great. Harry hoped it wouldn't interfere with whatever magic was hiding the text, but he wasn't hopeful.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" Neville gasped, trying to sort out the mess, without success. He was trying to mop up the spilled drink with a napkin but it wasn't working very well, especially as the drink was now dripping onto the floor as well.

"Quite alright, Neville." said Ron through gritted teeth, trying to dry himself.

"Wasn't your fault." Hermione tried to comfort the stricken boy, using a Quick-Drying Charm on her robes.

"I didn't mean to trip, it was an accident!" Neville sniffled.

"We know." said Ron curtly.

"It's alright, Neville, really." Hermione soothed him. "We can get this cleared up. You go and have your lunch."

"Yes, please Neville, go and have your lunch. Now." Ron's tones were rather less comforting than Hermione's.

Neville nodded, still sniffing and headed off, cradling Trevor in his arms.

"Bloody hell, look at me." sighed Ron. "Thank the gods it's Saturday and I can get changed. Honestly, Neville doesn't get any better, does he?"

Harry despondently wiped as much grape juice as possible off the diary. "You would have to have picked the red stuff, wouldn't you Ron? This diary's going to look like one of those ink-blot psychological tests now. Hope it hasn't done any real damage to it."

"I wouldn't worry, it might have Protection Charms on it or something." Hermione reassured him. "Open it, see what the damage is."

Harry did so, and gaped. Instead of the Rorschach blot he'd expected to see, the diary was as white and stain-free as it had ever been. It wasn't even wet. Harry remembered finding it in the first place and realising that the pages had been bone dry despite the diary having been submerged. An idea began to form.

"Hermione, pass me an ink bottle."

She did so, watching him rather strangely. Ron too was looking at him as if firmly convinced that his friend had finally cracked. Steeling himself against their disbelieving gazes, he let a few drops of ink fall onto one of the pages. And watched in amazement as the paper absorbed it entirely. Seconds later, it was as if he'd never marked the page.

Hermione and Ron were staring at him open-mouthed.

"Wow." whispered Ron. "How does it do that?"

"It absorbs whatever liquid touches it!" breathed Hermione. "Well, that magic must have been placed on the diary after it had been written in, or the text would have just disappeared - wait a second, maybe it did! Maybe that's the idea." Hermione sat up, a brainwave of tsunami-like proportions breaking onto the shores of her mind. "Harry! Try writing in it!" She passed him a quill. Harry dipped it in the ink bottle and held it poised above the paper.

"What should I write?"

"Anything! Just say hello or something."

Harry obediently wrote the single word *Hello*. The writing promptly disappeared. All three of them peered at the diary with bated breath.

And got the shock of their lives when it wrote back.

Hello. Who are you?

"What do I do?" breathed Harry.

"Reply." hissed Ron. "Tell it your name."

Harry did so. My name's Harry Potter. Who are you?

The reply came almost at once. *I am Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?*

"What do I tell it?" whispered Harry.

"Nothing." came Hermione's reply. "We're going back to the common room right now, while everyone's at lunch and we're going to carry on with this there. Come on."

Harry closed the book and followed them both out. At last, it looked like they were going to find out who the Heirs were. He should have been feeling excited about what they were going to uncover. So why was it that every time the diary had written back, he'd felt a little twinge in his scar, a little stab of cold in his heart, a distinct sense that all was not well? He brushed the thought out of his mind. He was being paranoid. It wasn't really a twinge was it? More of an itch, really. Nothing to worry about. Quickening his pace, he hurried after his friends.

Weeks passed. January turned into February. Candlemas, the day that marked the beginning of the end of winter, came and went. The Syndicate grew that bit bigger as Marlie insisted on recruiting Fred and George ("after all, we do need someone to market it in Gryffindor too, and there's no better salesmen than those two - RIANNE STOP SMIRKING! I do NOT fancy Fred!") while Rianne managed to persuade the others to let Lucas Vettinari join ("he's a mate of mine, I'd feel bad about not letting him in, and besides, if he joins, he'll have more money to put on the sweepstake - one word out of you, Marls, and you won't sleep for a week." "None are really occurring to me right now, Ri. Except maybe 'hypocrite'."). Paul Clearwater announced with pride that they had more than enough to get started, so a quill was duly ordered and arrived by the end of January. It was an instant success, with requests and deposits in the first month yielding enough money to order yet another one.

It soon became obvious among the teachers that something strange was going on.

"Gilderoy, I can't help noticing that ALL grades in your subject among my students have shot through the roof."

"I know, it's quite unbelievable, Severus. I'm sure I don't know how they're doing it." Lockhart beamed. "I suppose it must be down to my inspirational teaching finally taking root!"

"Must be." murmured Severus, turning away to come face to face with Minerva McGonagall, looking thin-lipped even by her standards.

"Severus, it has come to my attention that certain of my students are performing rather well in Defence Against the Dark Arts all of a sudden. I wonder if you could shed any light on the subject."

"Minerva, I teach Potions, as you surely know by now. Why not ask Gilderoy? It's his area of expertise not mine."

"That wasn't what I was getting at." Minerva pulled herself up to her full height, fixing Snape with a stare that made even him nervous. "Such improvements do not happen so widely overnight. Is it not perhaps possible that something underhand is going on here?"

"Minerva, I am at a loss to understand why you think I would know anything about the possible cause." Severus protested. "After all, it is nothing to do with me."

Minerva's eyes gleamed with cold as she moved in for the kill. "Maybe not you personally. However, there seems to be a trail of evidence leading slowly and inexorably back to the students of Slytherin House. What do you have to say about that, Severus?"

"Oh that's right, as soon as you suspect anything underhand, try and pin it on the Slytherins, I know." Severus sneered. "So what have you found out?"

"The students that show the most improvement all tend to be in Slytherin. Out of all the sudden improvers, there are more Slytherins than any other house combined. The earliest improvers were largely Slytherin. And there are almost no Hufflepuff improvers. I think we can safely conclude from this that the ringleaders are almost certainly in your House." She fixed him with her most penetrating gaze. Severus, however, was not to be intimidated.

"Very possibly. However, workshy, cunning and ambitious could describe any of my students. You're not really narrowing it down here." Severus purred, with an insouciance he cultivated especially for the purpose of infuriating Minerva McGonagall.

"Oooh, you...!" she seethed at him. "Severus, are you or are you not interested in finding out who is responsible for this and what they are playing at?"

"Oh most certainly." Severus replied calmly. "I want to congratulate them on their brilliance."

"Severus!" Minerva screamed. "Be serious!"

"I am being serious."

Minerva gave a strangled cry. "Severus! They are almost certainly cheating at their homework! Aren't you going to punish them at all?"

"I would. If the homework merited the name." Severus let the infuriating, almost Zen-like calmness go, its purpose achieved. "Listen, Minerva. Have you noticed any signs of improvement in any other subject than Lockhart's?"

"No." she was forced to admit.

"Exactly. Now if you were forced to do an assignment of his against your will, despite having a million and one better things to do with your time, and you discovered a quick and easy way of getting it done and out of the way, with no drop in quality of the work and maybe even an improvement, wouldn't you take it?"

"Well... maybe." Minerva admitted, a smile starting to creep across her face. "Oh Severus, I suppose I can't really blame them. In fact, I'm immensely curious as to how they've managed it. It must be incredibly ingenious. I don't normally say this, Severus, but twenty points to Slytherin for producing some kind of genius. Well done!" The smile faded. "Of course, if this trend starts occurring in other subjects, I will have to put a stop to it, you understand."

"Of course, Minerva. And I shall do my utmost to assist you." Severus promised. He paused. "Unless it happens to be Sybil Trelawney's lessons."

"Severus, everyone's always cheated in Divination, I wouldn't worry." Minerva smiled. "In fact, I'm not at all sure that it's possible not to resort to fraud in that subject."

"Oh, it's possible." Severus observed. "It's just not very easy."

Minerva appeared sceptical. "If you say so, Severus." She lowered her voice. "Valentine's Day tomorrow. Any idea what Gilderoy's planning?"

Severus shook his head. "No. He's being very close-lipped on the subject. I tried guile, I tried cunning, I tried manipulation. Nothing doing. He just keeps hinting he has this special surprise planned. I don't know what he's up to, but I think it involves large amounts of pink confetti and some midgets."

"Midgets?" The other teacher stared at him, unable, or to be more precise, unwilling, to imagine what on earth Lockhart could want midgets for.

"Midgets." As a Slytherin and a veteran of one too many of Lucius Malfoy's parties, Severus could imagine only too clearly why Lockhart might want midgets, and it wasn't a particularly cheering thought.

"Oh dear gods. What has he got planned?" Severus had hardly ever seen Minerva McGonagall worried before. It wasn't a pleasant sight. "Still, this is a school, there'll be children present, it won't be that bad, will it?" She tried to sound optimistic.

"It's what he's planning for the staffroom afterwards that worries me." said Severus darkly.

"Severus!" snapped Minerva. "You're being paranoid."

"I am not!" protested Severus. "Minerva, he keeps flirting with me, and three times in the last week I've caught him eyeing me up. He's not even bothering to hide it anymore. I'm telling you, if he sends me a Valentine, I will personally grab him by the overly decorated lapels of his robes and..."

"Severus!" McGonagall interrupted. "I forbid you to inflict any damage on Gilderoy Lockhart. No matter how much he provokes you."

"Oh go on." Severus pouted. "Please? Let me kill him, let me. I can make it look like an accident. Go on, Minerva, you know you want to. I'm very discreet."

A muscle began twitching in McGonagall's cheek, the same muscle that always twitched whenever she had to bite back what she really wanted to say.

"I'm sure you can," she replied, the ghost of a smile playing around her features, "but we'd never find a suitable replacement at such short notice. Good Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers are hard to find these days."

"I noticed."

"Now, now, Severus. I'm sure it won't be that bad. It can't be." McGonagall looked at Severus, an expression of dawning anxiety crossing her face. "Can it?"

"I don't know." said Severus, equally apprehensive. "But I'll tell you this, I've never felt more like calling in sick."

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"Poppy, please." Severus begged Madam Pomfrey the following morning. "Say I'm ill. Please. I'll be an exemplary patient. I'll just stay in a private room with my books and some marking. You won't even know I'm there. Please?"

Madam Pomfrey was having none of it. "No. Look, I'm sorry Severus, but there's a lot of colds and flu going around, there are people genuinely ill, I cannot give away valuable bed space to those who just want an excuse to avoid school! Including you, Severus."

"I can be genuinely ill if you like." Severus offered. "I know lots of potions that'll create the symptoms of any illness you care to name. Come on, Poppy, please?"

"Severus, no!" the mediwitch snapped at him. "If I find you here presenting any symptoms that are not certified as genuine and unsimulated by Professor Dumbledore himself, I shall refuse to treat you. Do you understand?"

"Poppy, I beg you." Severus pleaded. "You don't know... you don't know what he's like! He keeps winking at me and... and... smiling at me and... dropping hints. Oh gods, he has something horrible planned, I just know it! Something involving me, and flowers, and chocolates, and a bottle of Chianti, and a troupe of performing midgets."

"Midgets?" Poppy stared at him.

"I'm telling you, there's a whole group of them staying at Rosmerta's. According to Hagrid, they're here for some kind of Valentine's Day event, and the only one I know of is this surprise Lockhart's got planned. Poppy, I beg you, if you have any sympathy for me at all, *please* don't let him anywhere near me! Please!" Severus threw himself at her feet, all dignity forgotten, or rather, sacrificed in the hope of avoiding a greater humiliation.

"Severus, you have my sympathies, you really do." Madam Pomfrey sighed. "However, you're the fourth member of staff to try that this morning. If I said yes to you all, there'd be no one left to do any teaching."

"Who were the other three?" Severus asked, looking up.

"Mildred Hooch, Libitina Vector and oddly enough, Ebenezer Binns."

"Binns?!? What was wrong with him, ectoplasm not clammy enough?" raged Severus, getting to his feet. "Were the chains perhaps getting a little rusty? Was he feeling insufficiently wraithlike? Honestly, Poppy, what is there to go wrong with a *ghost*?"

"He reckoned that the room temperature wasn't dropping around him like it should. Severus, stop sneering. It's a very serious complaint for a ghost. It means the soul's getting weaker, and if that happens, then the ghost either has to find the Underworld before it's too late, or risk dying completely, with no chance of ever passing the memories to the spirit. It's very serious."

"Is it. And was Binns suffering at all?" sneered Severus.

"No, there was nothing wrong with him so I told him to get back to teaching. Just as there is nothing wrong with you, so why don't you stop wasting my time and get to breakfast!"

"Alright, alright." muttered Severus. "I'm going. This will be remembered, Poppy. Next time you need my assistance." He swept out of the hospital wing, and with a heavy heart, headed for breakfast.

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It turned out Severus wasn't the only Hogwarts teacher who was worried. On the way to breakfast, he found himself running into Hagrid and Mildred Hooch, who looked as miserable as he felt.

"Morning, Severus." snarled Mildred.

"Good morning, Mildred. Feeling better?"

"No." she hissed at him. "And it isn't a good morning, as you should surely know by now. Forgotten the date, have we?"

"As if I could. So, you tried the old calling in sick routine as well, did you?"

"The trouble with Poppy is that she is just too darn good!" Mildred snapped. "I spent ages trying to fake Chaser's Elbow too. Saw right through it within seconds, damn the woman. Now I'll have to spend all day putting up with over-excited teenagers cooing over Valentines, couples working off their excess hormones, and that fool Gilderoy grinning all day and asking me how many cards I got this morning."

"Why, how many did you get this morning?" Severus asked.

"None of your damn business."

Severus couldn't help smiling. He'd always liked Mildred Hooch. A fellow misanthrope, with very little love of anything that smacked of sentimentality and both feet rooted firmly on the ground, when she wasn't flying anyway. Hard to believe she was an ex-Hufflepuff.

"Ah don' know what yeh're so worried abou'." Hagrid put in. "It's only once a year, after all. Jus' one day where we can all let our 'air down an' 'ave a bit o' fun, like. So what if Gilderoy's a bit over-enthusiastic. Don't mind 'im, he'll go away if yeh ignore 'im. Works fer me."

"Hagrid, if he stays longer than a quarter of an hour, you've trained Fang to start snarling at him." Mildred pointed out.

"Ah didn' train 'im!" Hagrid protested. "Fang learnt that all by 'imself. 'E's a very intelligent dog, yeh know. Great judge o' character."

"He runs and hides under the nearest table if I go anywhere near him." Severus observed.

Hagrid roared with laughter, slapping Severus on the back. "There yeh go then! Great judge o' character, my Fang, great judge."

Mildred snickered as Severus staggered forward, trying to regain his balance. After a few minutes, he righted himself.

"Yes, well, I'm sure he's a very talented and useful animal deep down." he said testily. "Very deep down." he added under his breath. Hagrid was noted for his easygoing

nature, but on the other hand, he was bigger than Severus, part-giant and *very* fond of his animals, and it didn't do to push him.

They were getting nearer the Great Hall. And one of the first things Severus noted, his heart sinking at the realisation, was how quiet it was. Too quiet. The noise level normally generated by three hundred students at breakfast could have drowned out a dragon. Not today.

The three of them exchanged worried glances. This was not good news. You didn't spend ten years or more in teaching without learning to recognise the signs. Severus drew his wand and motioned for the other two to follow him. Slowly, very slowly, he opened one of the side doors.

And nearly dropped his wand in horror at the scene before him.

"Ber-loody Hades," he heard Hagrid whisper behind him. "What the 'ell's 'appened to our Great 'All?"

"I think I'm going to be sick." said Mildred faintly.

"Looking at the colour scheme, I think someone already has." said Severus, his eyes travelling the length and breadth of the room in disbelief at the sheer tastelessness of it all. The walls were coated in pink flowers. And not small, discreet and delicate pink flowers either. These were huge, massive, bright, lurid, big pink flowers, in various shades ranging from Hot Pink to Day-Glo Pink to Big, Bold, Don't-Look-At-Without-Sunglasses Pink, and a few shades that Dulux haven't got names for yet. Equally horrible pink balloons with matching ribbons attached had been hung from the ceiling, and not a few had been tied to the House tables. Severus was gratified to see that the ones on the Slytherin table had already been detached and were even now being used in what resembled an impromptu game of volleyball, those that weren't lying in pieces on the floor anyway, while the flower arrangements were merrily burning away. Ah, my beloved Slytherins, I have taught you well, he thought with pride, gleefully noting the envious looks on the faces of the other Houses, who were wishing they could get away with that sort of thing, although Fred and George Weasley were even now beginning to loosen some of the balloons at their table. Most of the other students, however, seemed too stunned or too revolted to want to say anything.

The most horrific sight of all though was waiting for them at the staff table. Gilderoy Lockhart, wearing robes of bright pink, beaming at the scene before him.

"Pink robes? With blonde hair?" whispered Mildred to Severus. "I thought gay men were meant to have immaculate dress sense and impeccable taste?"

"Lockhart was obviously too busy trying to decide what to wear when the gods were dishing out the taste genes." Severus whispered back. "Although he did try to ask Caitlin Tyler out in September, so maybe you're wrong."

Mildred just nodded sagely. "Caitlin Tyler, eh? That figures. It's the need for a dominant mother figure plus the hints of having suffered at the hands of men. She's got a very large gay fan club of both sexes."

"And how would you know that?" Severus raised an eyebrow. At this, Mildred just coughed and blushed, looking hurriedly away. Severus just rolled his eyes. You learnt something new about your colleagues every day.

Unluckily for him, though, the distraction proved fatal. Lockhart had noticed him.

"Severus!" Without further ado, Lockhart bounded over to him. Severus groaned and tried to make a run for it, but Hagrid was blocking the only escape route. Trapped, he could only turn and grit his teeth.

"Gilderoy."

"Happy Valentine's Day!" he beamed. "Come on, come and take a seat... over here... next to me..." He reached out to take Severus by the arm. Severus recoiled as if he'd been slapped.

"No need to assist me, Gilderoy, I'm quite capable of sitting down by myself." Severus snapped, resolutely sitting down in the nearest seat.

"Of course you are, Severus." cooed Lockhart. "A big strong man like you surely ought to be!" He slid gracefully into the seat next to him, not seeming to notice Hagrid sniggering on Severus's other side.

"Help me." Severus mouthed at Mildred, now seated safely at the other end of the table next to Professor Flitwick. She just grinned back at him and gave him a thumbs up. Severus could only groan inwardly. Great, trapped next to Lockhart all breakfast. Wonderful.

Fortunately, Lockhart was talking to Hagrid at the moment. "So Hagrid, how are you today? Getting into the spirit of things?"

"Ah do try, Professer Lockhart." said Hagrid modestly.

"Splendid, splendid!" Lockhart clapped his hands. "How many cards have you got so far?"

"Ah well, yeh know, me an' Fang, we don' bother much wi' Valentine's Day. Not when it's jus' the two of us at 'ome, like." Hagrid was playing the humble country unsophisticate to the hilt. Severus wished he had that option.

"Nonsense!" cried Lockhart. "Valentine's Day is for everyone! Isn't that right, Severus?" He clapped the Potions teacher heartily on the back.

For the first and only time in his life, Severus felt a twinge of regret that the days of murder and torture with the Death Eaters were over. The thought of subjecting Lockhart to some of the more soul-destroying and unpleasant tortures that Voldemort had come up with had never had so much appeal. But no. Lockhart wasn't worth Azkaban.

"Whatever you say, Gilderoy." Severus muttered.

"Of course, I'm sure *you* must get plenty of Valentine's Day cards!" Gilderoy winked at him. "Why, a good-looking man like you must have half the school lusting after him, eh Severus?" Lockhart leaned that bit closer, much to Severus's discomfort. "Did you get one with a picture of a cherub in the top right hand corner of the envelope?" he breathed in Severus's ear. "What did you think of it?" Lockhart's hand came to rest on his knee, squeezing gently before running up his thigh. Severus shot to his feet at once.

"I've got to go." he explained, heart pounding. "I've, er, got a potion on the boil and it has to be stirred every hour on the hour without fail or it's likely to explode and take half the dungeons with it."

"Oh Severus, let the house-elves deal with that!" Lockhart purred as he grabbed Severus by the sleeve and pulled him back to his seat. "Besides, it's time for my big announcement." He got to his feet, leaving Severus wondering what on earth that could be and praying that he wasn't involved in any way. The entire school being told that Professor Snape was falling head over heels for their glamourous Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher was more than he could really handle right now. Too late to do anything though. Lockhart was even now motioning for silence, and launching into his speech.

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Over on the Slytherin table, the girls' initial reactions were much the same as those of Snape and Madam Hooch.

"Oh. My. God." was all Deanna could say when she walked in.

"It's very, er, pink." said Luella, trying to be generous.

Rianne just looked around, taking it all in before uttering the single word "Lockhart".

Marlie's response was the most vocal.

"Pink??" she screamed at the top of her voice. "With a ceiling *that* colour?" The enchanted ceiling was reflecting the sky outside, and it was a cloudy, overcast day. "Who on *earth* came up with that??"

"Marls, I hate to tell you this, but I think it might have been your favourite Lockhart." said Deanna, her nose wrinkling in disgust as she brushed the heart-shaped confetti off her seat. "God, look at this stuff, it's going to be all over my robes, in my hair, it's going to be turning up everywhere for weeks, I just know it."

Rianne examined one of the flower arrangements on the table. "This could do with a little... improvement." she murmured, casually fingering a rose pink petal. Smiling, she touched the tip of her wand to it. "*Ignito!*" The flowers promptly burst into flames, and Rianne sat back, smiling with satisfaction. Some of the other Slytherins noticed this and before long half the vases on the table were burning away, with flames in just about every colour of the rainbow.

Marlie took a seat, checking herself in the pocket mirror she always carried with her. "Hmm. I might be OK, it seems to camouflage with blonde hair. You on the other hand, Tyler, are screwed."

"She wishes." came Draco's snide tones. "Get any Valentines yet, Tyler?"

"No." Deanna snarled at him. Draco was sitting about three seats down, alone for once.

"Too bad." he purred. "I've got hundreds from all my many admirers. Crabbe and Goyle are back at the Nest right now opening them all for me. Such a hard life being a sex symbol, you know. Except you wouldn't, but hey, let's not argue."

"Makes a change." muttered Rianne. She changed tack, something occurring to her. "Hey, Malfoy. When you say Crabbe and Goyle are 'opening' your Valentines, you don't perhaps mean 'writing them so you don't look like a complete loser', do you?"

"No, of course not." snapped Draco. However, Luella couldn't help noticing that he seemed a little... rattled. His blushes were saved by the arrival of Pansy Parkinson, clutching a red envelope which she lost no time in presenting to him with a kiss.

"Hello, Drakie-poo." she cooed. "I got you a Valentine."

"Why, thank you, Pan." He produced a red envelope from inside his robes and handed it to her. "I got you one too."

The two of them both sat down, too busy ripping their cards open and reading them to get any more sentimental, for which the girls were extremely thankful.

"Oh, how sweet!" squealed Pansy. "Drakie darling, you are such a romantic - hang on." She scanned the card again, the insincere smile turning into an all too sincere snarl. "Draco!" she yelled. "This was written with one of our Quills! Don't deny it, I can tell the writing style! Using a Quick Quotes Quill to write a Valentine card, you complete and utter bastard!" She picked up a bread roll and threw it at him. Draco dived under the table.

"Pansy, now Pansy, don't be cross, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I was just feeling uninspired, and I didn't want to write you anything but the best, Pansy I'm sorry, I really am, please stop hitting me, ow!" Pansy had abandoned throwing food at him and had now resorted to slapping him repeatedly instead.

"Your card was lovely, really!" yelled Draco. "It was really sweet, very touching, very well put together and it even rhymed - wait a second." Pushing Pansy away, he got to his feet and snatched up her card, rereading it. "As I thought!" he shouted triumphantly. "You used a Quill too, didn't you? Admit it. You did didn't you?"

Pansy immediately stopped trying to attack Draco and began to blush. She swiftly turned on the charm. "Oh but Draco, I was just using it to do some homework, and your card happened to be there at the time, and it was just too tempting and... oh

Draco, you won't be angry at me, will you?" She pouted at him, fluttering her eyelids in a little girl way that really didn't suit her.

"Good gods, Pan." sighed Draco. "Just don't blame me for doing it ever again, you hear? Come on, sit down, let's have some breakfast."

The fourth years watched in disbelief as the two of them began tucking into their cereal.

"I really don't believe those two sometimes." sighed Rianne. "Honestly, the rank hypocrisy in that relationship takes some beating."

Marlie agreed. "The only thing more puzzling than what he sees in her is what she sees in him."

"That's easy enough." laughed Deanna. "He's rich and from an influential family, and she's an overly made-up tart who flatters his ego at every opportunity. Don't you think so, Lu? Lu?" She noticed Luella watching the teachers' table, frowning. "What's up, Lu?"

"That's odd." said Luella thoughtfully. "Professor Snape just leapt up like someone's set fire to him. I wonder what's going on over there."

Deanna turned and looked, just in time to see Lockhart pull him back into his seat. "There's your answer, Lu. That famous self-control finally snapped, and he's trying to make a bid for freedom. Can't say I blame him."

"Oh gods." groaned Rianne. "He's getting up. He's going to make a speech. Take cover!"

Lockhart had indeed got to his feet, trademark stupid grin plastered all over his face.

"Happy Valentine's Day!" he shouted.

"Drop dead." muttered Rianne.

"And may I thank the forty-six people who have so far sent me cards!"

Three sets of eyes swivelled to look at Marlie, who immediately became very interested in fiddling with the strap on her bag.

"I have taken the liberty of arranging this little surprise for you all - and the fun doesn't stop here!"

Across the table from Luella, Rianne looked as if she was losing the will to live.

Lockhart clapped his hands. From the main doors leading into the entrance hall came a troupe of dwarves, decked out in golden wings, carrying harps. Marlie gasped in an odd mixture of delight and foreboding.

"Oh my god, he's got some midgets in!" she whispered.

"Midgets?" asked Luella, confused.

"Yeah, midgets." Marlie nodded.

"They're a standard fixture at all the major Slytherin parties." Rianne explained. "No gathering is complete without them. If there's midgets in attendance, that only means one thing - decadence, excess and enough iniquity to keep the televangelism industry in business for years."

"But that sort of thing's not allowed at Hogwarts, surely?" gasped Luella.

Rianne shrugged. "Who can tell? Quite possibly no one told Lockhart what kind of people hire troupes of performing midgets. Either that or the staff are planning one hell of a party."

Both Deanna and Marlie gagged.

"Rianne, that's gross."

"Oh my god, can you imagine any of them, you know, doing it?"

It was now Rianne's turn to screw up her face in disgust. "Gods. That's truly horrible. I am so sorry, you guys."

"So you should be." Deanna told her. "Don't ever do it again."

"My friendly, card-carrying cupids!" Lockhart announced. Luella blinked and looked at them again. They didn't seem very friendly to her, and she'd never seen cupids with beards before.

"They will be roving around the school today to deliver your Valentines!"

"There you go, Tyler." said Rianne promptly. "You can stop worrying about them - if they're only delivering Valentines, they won't be going near you all day." She had to duck to avoid the croissant that Deanna sent flying her way.

"I'm sure my colleagues will want to enter into the spirit of the occasion! Why not ask Professor Snape to whip up a Love Potion!"

All four of them turned to look at their House Master.

"Dare you!" whispered Marlie to Deanna.

Deanna looked at Snape again. That was not an expression you normally associated with romance and matchmaking. That was an expression you normally associated with the Mafia. And yet, she couldn't resist the opportunity to tease him. So it was that after breakfast finished, Deanna made straight for her Potions Master with her friends

in tow. It wasn't easy. He was ducking through the crowds, snarling at any student who got in his way (no change there then), trying desperately to look inconspicuous.

"Morning, sir." Deanna grinned as she caught up with him in one of the corridors leading off from the Great Hall. "So, any chance of one of them Love Potions then?"

A few nearby Hufflepuffs gasped in horror and swiftly made their escape, hardly daring to believe that someone had dared to tease Professor Snape of all people, and convinced that Deanna Tyler was about to meet her maker. However, it didn't happen.

"Under no circumstances." Snape snarled at her. "Please, Miss Tyler, please tell me you of all people haven't succumbed to this romantic Valentine's Day foolishness."

"No chance." Deanna grimaced. "Gods, but I've never seen such a tasteless spectacle since Mum showed me her old photos from the Seventies. Lockhart's surpassed himself this time, hasn't he?"

"Now, now, Miss Tyler. Your mother, whatever her faults, always had excellent dress sense. Lockhart on the other hand..." He froze as the very man's cheery tones rang out from inside the Great Hall.

"Yoo-hoo! Severus!"

Snape froze in terror, before turning to Luella. "Hide me!" he hissed at her, eyes staring wildly.

"But sir, isn't that against the rules?" said Luella, troubled.

"I don't care!" Snape snarled. "Use Glamoury, use the Imperius Curse if you like, do whatever you like, just don't let him see me!"

"Well... OK then." Luella drew him back against the wall and cast a Glamour around them both, just as Lockhart emerged into the corridor.

"Severus! Oh Severus!" he called. "Now where did he go, I'm sure he came this way." He noticed Deanna, Marlie and Rianne standing there. "Hello children! Have you seen your Potions Master at all? I'm sure I saw him pass this way."

All three girls shook their heads. "I've not seen him." said Deanna.

"He must have taken a different route." Marlie suggested.

"I think I saw him go that way." Rianne offered, pointing towards a corridor that led upwards towards the staffroom and Charms classroom.

"Ah! Thank you, young ladies! I shall go and find him forthwith!" Lockhart hustled off, calling after the absentee professor. "Severus! Where are you! Severus! It's Gilderoy here! Come out, don't be shy! I don't bite!" His voice trailed off as he disappeared round the corner.

Luella released the Glamour, allowing Snape to stagger forward, gasping with relief.

"Thank you." he whispered.

Deanna was looking at him very curiously. "What did he want then? Or do I not want to know?"

"Trust me, Miss Tyler, you really do *not* want to know." Snape shuddered. "Right, I am going back to the dungeons. And I am staying there until tomorrow. Should any of you need to see me for any reason, tap out the tune to 'Riders on the Storm' on my office door. I daresay you'll know that one, Miss Tyler."

"Yeah, it's one of Mum's favourites." Deanna grimaced. Rianne looked rather offended.

"Hey, some of us happen to *like* the Doors." she snapped.

"Weirdo." Deanna grinned. Rianne just shrugged.

"Hey, I spent a lot of time travelling as a kid. When you spend your formative years in the back of a mobile home listening to the local AOR station, these things leave a mark."

"Ooh, you poor thing." Deanna breathed, laying a hand on her arm. "Having to listen to that all day." Rianne glared at her.

"Quite." said Snape, having worse things to worry about. "I shall see you four later. And if you should happen to see Professor Lockhart again, please tell him I'm at an all-day conference on self-stirring cauldrons and won't be back until later. Much later." He turned on his heel and walked off in as swift a manner he could muster without actually having to run or heaven forbid, scurry.

"Poor thing." sighed Luella. "To have Lockhart after him. Don't blame him for wanting to avoid him."

"Lu," Rianne began, "when you say'after him', you don't suppose it refers to performing-midgets-and-general-decadence after him, do you?"

The other three screwed up their face in disgust.

"Rianne! Stop it!"

"Didn't we tell you to stop giving us gross thoughts?" Marlie yelled.

"Gods Ri, Snape and Lockhart, that's *horrible!*" Deanna shuddered. "Please, never ever mention it again. Ever."

"Hey, I wasn't the one telling Professor Snape to stop being shy and come out!" Rianne protested. "Dear gods, now there's a phrase with some interesting double meanings. Not to mention the bit about Lockhart not biting..."

"RIANNE!" the other three screamed at her. Rianne promptly stopped talking.

"OK, OK, I'll stop there. That image is too disturbing even for me..."

"And that's saying something." Marlie commented. She was distracted by the sound of giggling behind her. Turning round, she saw Ginny Weasley huddled with her friends, giving instructions to one of the dwarfs. Stepping back, the dwarf bowed, said "Righty-oh, I'll deliver it this afternoon." and headed off, leaving three grinning first years.

"So what are you three up to?" Marlie enquired.

"Nothing." they chorused.

"Nothing, eh. So that dwarf's delivering nothing this afternoon, is he? I find it hard to believe." Marlie leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile. "Come on, you can let me in on it. I won't tell anyone. Promise."

Ginny exchanged looks with her friends. Lydia shook her head.

"Sorry, Marls." said Ginny. "I can't tell you yet. But you'll find out. I promise you, you'll love it! See ya, Marls!" The three of them left, still giggling.

Luella arrived behind her. "What was all that about then?"

"I don't know." Marlie replied. "But this I tell you, I do hope it's not directed at us."

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Fortunately for them, it wasn't. However, later on, they might begin to wish that it had been. However, that's in the future, so let us not concern ourselves with it now. Let us get back to the Valentine's Day fun and games.

It was just before the last lesson of the day. All day, the dwarves had been interrupting lessons to deliver cards, much to the students' delight and the teachers' annoyance. The only exception had been Snape's lessons, where the first dwarf to interrupt had taken one look at Snape, immediately shut up and announced that it could wait until later and hurriedly backed off. There'd been no further visits to any of Snape's classes.

And so it was that even Deanna was in a relatively good mood as the four of them made their way back from Charms. The festive atmosphere meant that no one was getting any work done, and life was generally good. They'd even managed to escape the Valentine-bearing dwarves.

Unfortunately, it was here that their luck ran out. They rounded the corner and came to a halt as one of the dwarves stepped out in front of them, brandishing a mail sack in one hand and a harp in the other, waving the instrument around like a weapon of war.

"I got a Valentine for a Miss Rianne Stormosi."

"That's me." smiled Rianne, stepping forward expectantly. The dwarf reached into his bag and produced a small jewel encrusted box, which he presented to her with a bow. Rianne took it from him and opened it. There was a flash of light, and then a jet black snake appeared, rising out of the box, swaying hypnotically to and fro, green eyes heavy-lidded but not blinking once. Hissing seductively, it lowered its head, slithered on to Rianne's wrist and began coiling up her arm, on to her shoulders and around her neck, where it settled like a scarf, all the while rubbing her affectionately. Rianne didn't seem to mind in the slightest, smiling with the same drowsy expression that the snake had in its eyes. Marlie backed away nervously, while Luella could only look on in envy. What she wouldn't give for a serpentine Valentine of her very own.

"Who's it from?" asked Deanna.

"Lucassss." hissed Rianne, clearly lost in a world of her own. Reaching into the box, she removed a small green and silver embossed card, the smile not fading for a second. "This snake is yours 'til the next day dawns. May it keep you company until I'm able to do it in person. Ever yours, LV. Ah, he's such a cutie." sighed Rianne. "Knows exactly what a woman wants. I must say thank you."

The dwarf coughed. "I got another one 'ere for a Miss Marlene Lovegood."

"That's me!" trilled Marlie, stepping forward in anticipation. The dwarf reached into his bag once more and produced a bunch of flowers for her. Beaming, Marlie took them from him and inhaled deeply.

And promptly shrieked the place down when a jet of water shot out from one of them, soaking her from the waist up.

"Fred Weasley, I'll get you for this!" she yelled to no one in particular, as the other three fell about laughing.

"There's a card with them." said the dwarf, somehow managing to keep a straight face as he presented Marlie with a small white card with a big red 'W' on the back.

"Marls, This'll teach you to go round accepting flowers from strange men, won't it? ("and you don't get much stranger than him - George") Never mind, eh. Have a cool day and enjoy the flowers - if you refill the hidden water tank, you can use them again on another unsuspecting victim. Cheerio, Fred." Marlie shook her head, still trying to shake the water off. "Typical. Absolutely typical. Look at me, I'm soaked, I'll need to get changed, my mascara must be running a mile, we've got Herbology next which involves going outside, I'm going to freeze to death, I just know it! Oooh!" She shook her hands, trying to get rid of the excess drops. "Right, that does it. I'm going back to the dorm to get changed, and get rid of these bloody things. Come on, Lu, you can come with me, help me reapply all the make-up that is now no doubt ruined."

"Rather you than me." grinned Deanna as Luella found herself dragged off by a still complaining Marlie.

"We'll save some seats for you!" Rianne called after them. "Get those flowers refilled too, we're with the Hufflepuffs. Some of them are bound to fall for it."

Deanna shook her head, still smiling. "Trust Fred to send Marls a joke Valentine. Must have taken him ages to put that together." She was about to leave when she noticed the dwarf still standing there. "Er... can we help you?"

"I've still got one Valentine left to deliver." said the dwarf obstinately. "For a Miss Deanna Tyler."

Deanna spun round to look at Rianne. "What? I've got a Valentine?"

"Don't look at me, I'm as surprised as you are!" Rianne protested. "Go on, let's see it."

Deanna took the red envelope the dwarf was holding out for her with considerable trepidation. While she wasn't a social outcast by any means, she'd never even considered herself as up for grabs romantically. To her, boys were either mates, enemies or completely outside her mental radar. To get a Valentine was something she'd not expected, and she wasn't entirely sure she liked the idea.

The card within turned out to be nothing like your typical Valentine. The background was royal blue, with a delicate golden border which depicted roses climbing up what looked like a Gothic archway, showcasing a central design. And it was hardly one to inspire romance. It was a picture of what looked like a giant bird of prey rearing triumphant over what appeared to be a mortally wounded reptile of some kind, all exquisitely drawn in glorious Technicolor. It was disturbing, and yet in its own way, strangely compelling. Deanna couldn't take her eyes off it.

"Read it, what's it say?" Rianne was urging her. Distracted, Deanna flipped it open, her mind still on the picture. She read the writing inside, which had the even inhumanity of a Quick Quotes Quill on the neutral setting. Given the success of the Syndicate lately, it could have been anyone.

"This is what you do to me on a regular basis. You, with your eyes like daggers, and your words, each one like a well-chosen slap. Know that each one cuts into me, wounding me to the core, although you'll never see it. But I wanted you to know. Wanted you to know that you have it in you to bring me to my knees. For yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever, Amen." She lowered the card, trembling. "Who on earth..." She turned round to face the dwarf. "Who sent it? Tell me!"

"Sorry, miss." the dwarf shrugged. "Can't say. Client confidentiality and all that. Besides, this gentleman was very insistent that I tell no one he was sending it. Very insistent indeed."

"Not even me?!" Deanna demanded incredulously.

"Especially not you." The dwarf turned to go. "I gotta go. Got another Valentine on this route. Musical one this time." He walked off down the corridor, consulting a list of future victims.

"When I find out who this was..." Deanna whispered, still shaking.

"Don't like it then, huh?"

"Yes, no, I don't know, it's just... Damn them!" Deanna swore. "How dare they! How dare they send me that... thing!" She thrust the card into her bag with a shiver of disgust.

"It was very nicely drawn though." mused Rianne, stroking her snake. "I don't think they wanted to make fun of you."

"It's creepy." shuddered Deanna. "I don't like it. Don't like knowing that there's someone out there willing to go to those lengths. Someone thinking about me in that way. Ugh!"

Rianne put an arm around her friend's shoulders, not knowing quite what to say. "Hey. Don't let it get to you. Lu, Marls and me, we'll protect you. Come on, let's follow that dwarf. See which poor sucker's getting humiliated next. Take your mind off things."

Deanna nodded mutely and let Rianne lead her off.

It didn't take long to find out who the poor sucker in question was. The two girls rounded the corner to find quite a crowd gathering, including Ginny Weasley and friends. The focus of attention seemed to be a small fight going on between the dwarf and his victim, who, Rianne realised with amusement, was none other than Harry Potter.

"What's happening?" Deanna asked a giggling Ginny. She noticed Harry engaged in a tug of war with the dwarf, trying to rip his bag out of his hands. All too successfully as it turned out, for the bag tore open, the contents flying everywhere.

"Ooh! Don't tell me Harry Potter's got a secret admirer!" Deanna laughed.

Ginny exchanged knowing grins with her friends. "You could say that, yes."

Rianne was not slow to pick up on the implication. "Wouldn't happen to be a first year Slytherin by any chance, would it?"

"Might be." Ginny admitted, blushing.

"OK, OK, it was us." Lydia confessed. "That's what we were planning this morning. We didn't have any cards, so we scribbled a verse and got it sent as a singing Valentine."

"Ginny likes him, you see, so we thought we'd help her send him something." Autumn explained.

"Autumn!" hissed a mortified Ginny. "I don't fancy Harry Potter!"

"That's not what you said the other night." grinned Lydia. Both girls laughed as Ginny squirmed, blushing even more.

"Girls, girls." Rianne intervened with a smile. "Stop teasing her. He is famous after all, and rather sweet, although personally not my type."

"No, he's more suited to Luella." Deanna smirked. "You see," she whispered conspiratorially, "Lu wants him as a toyboy. Sorry Gin, looks like you might have to share him."

"Oh." Ginny deflated. However, her gloom didn't last long. "Ah well. Never mind. Luella can have him Monday, Wednesday, Friday, I'll have him Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday. Reckon Lu'll agree?"

"Don't see why not." Deanna shrugged. "Sounds reasonable enough to me, eh Ri?"

"Perfectly sensible arrangement." Rianne agreed. Her smile faded into a frown. "Oh gods. Look who just turned up."

They all turned. And promptly grimaced to see Draco turn up with Crabbe and Goyle in tow.

"What's going on here?" drawled Draco. Harry heard the voice, looked up, groaned and started to make a run for it. Unfortunately the dwarf had other ideas.

"Not so fast, you!" grunted the dwarf, rugby tackling him to the floor and pouncing on him. "I've got a Valentine to deliver and I ain't leavin' until it's done. Right. Yer singin' Valentine."

And so the dwarf proceeded to sing. Loudly. Off-key. In such a way that you would have had to have been deaf or stupid to have missed it. Rianne and Deanna both exchanged sympathetic glances, eternally thankful that their deliveries hadn't had an audience.

At last, it was over. The dwarf got up, bowed briefly and left in search of his next victim, leaving Harry picking himself up, trying not to meet anyone's eyes. Which he didn't, but only because everyone was too busy laughing.

Autumn dried her eyes. "Oh dear. Do you think we went a bit over the top with that?"

"Don't be silly Autumn, it worked just fine." Lydia grinned. "He'll get over it."

"Hope so." whispered Ginny. "I didn't plan on having Draco Malfoy there though. Hope he doesn't pick on Harry too much."

"I wouldn't worry." Deanna told them. "Harry's tough. And besides, Malfoy would have found something to taunt him about it. That's what Malfoy does, make people's lives a misery." A shadow crossed her face, the outward sign of a memory that Rianne could identify only too clearly.

"Come on." she urged Deanna. "We'd better go, we don't want to keep Sprout waiting. It's miles to the Herbology greenhouses."

Deanna nodded and turned to say goodbye to Ginny. And paused, noticing two things. One was that Ginny appeared to have frozen on the spot. The other was Draco speaking.

"Wonder what Potter's written in this?"

Deanna drew her wand and spun round. You didn't need to be a Slytherin of Rianne's intelligence to know what that meant. Drawing her own wand, she turned to see what Draco was up to now.

He was holding a small black book that had evidently fallen out of Harry's bag and waving it around, holding it just out of Harry's reach.

"Give it back, Malfoy!" Harry yelled at him.

"When I've finished reading it." Draco drawled.

"Malfoy, if you don't hand it over right now, I'll..."

"You'll what?" sneered Draco. "Do something I'll regret? I don't think so, somehow!"

"Do something!" Ginny implored the two fourth years, clearly terrified. Deanna looked at Rianne, who nodded agreement.

"*Accio!*" The book flew out of Draco's hands at once, coming in to land in Rianne's waiting hands. Draco spun round, snarling.

"What the hell do you want, Stormosi?" he raged at her.

"Lots of things." replied Rianne calmly. "A beachside villa in Ibiza. A green Lotus Esprit. Fame and fortune. The political influence and financial muscle to take out a government of my choice on a whim. My dad to stop embarrassing me. But I'll settle for you leaving Harry Potter alone and getting out of my comfort zone. You're using up my valuable oxygen, Malfoy."

"Far be it from me to inconvenience one with your 'connections'." Draco gave a little mock bow, that insolent grin showing all too clearly what he meant by connections. Rianne suppressed the urge to lash out at him. He'd keep for another day.

"I'll be on my way just as soon as I can." Draco's eyes narrowed. "Just as soon as you let me have that little book there."

"Malfoy," said Rianne evenly, "how do you want your no? Verbal or magical?" She indicated Deanna, who was even now raising her wand to Draco's eye-level. "You see, Tyler here's a bit volatile. Unpredictable. Given to using rather stronger spells than are really needed and not gifted with self-control. She's a lot like her mother in that

respect. Now, I can restrain her. But not for very long. And if my concentration were to drop for even a second..."

"Rianne," growled Deanna in a most impressive manner that she'd copied from her vast collection of thrash metal CDs, "Let me hex him. Let me. I sense the blood in his very veins, inviting a good cursing. Go on. Let me."

"Later, Tyler." purred Rianne.

"No!" Deanna snarled, her face twisting in rage. "Need... to hex him... NOW!" She leapt forward as she screamed the last word, brandishing her wand. Rianne idly flicked out a hand, catching her by the collar of her robes.

"Now boys." she smiled. "As you can see, I can hold her back. Just. But if I were to accidentally let go..." She loosened her grip a little, and the hissing, spitting Fury that was Deanna Tyler snarled and leapt towards them a little. "You get my point. Now why don't you just run along before she slips out of my grasp, eh? Get yourself a nice head start."

Draco looked from one to the other, glaring. Then, beckoning to Crabbe and Goyle, he turned on his heel and stalked off, defeated for now but surely planning revenge.

As the three Slytherins walked off, Deanna calmed down and, on being released from Rianne's grip, turned to her, grinning broadly.

"Ri, what's funnier, the way they run or the looks on their faces?"

"I just like the power trip." said Rianne amiably. She examined the diary. "So what is this anyway?"

"It's mine." said Harry quickly. "I found it a few weeks ago."

Rianne was about to reply, when she felt Ginny tugging urgently at her sleeve.

"Please Rianne, if he found it, surely we should hand it in?" said the wide-eyed first year, apparently terrified its owner might return for it.

"She's got a point." Deanna put in. "We should really hand it in. The owner might be looking for it."

"Maybe." murmured Rianne. "Whose is it, anyway?" She flicked it open and frowned. T. M. Riddle? There wasn't anyone of that name in Hogwarts, was there? She passed it to Deanna. "Here, Tyler, check this out. Any idea who that is?"

Deanna took it from her and read. And then a strange thing happened. As she read it, her eyes widened and a look of horror spread across her face. Immediately, she snapped the book shut.

"Where did you get this?" she demanded, turning on Harry.

"I told you. I just found it!" Harry protested. "Lu was there when I picked it up, she'll tell you! Ask her!"

"Count on it, I will." said Deanna grimly. She turned to Rianne. "Come on. We've got to find Lu and Marls, and quickly."

"Don't I get my diary back?" Harry snapped.

"No, Harry, you don't." said Deanna. She relaxed a little, the alarm fading. "Look Harry, I can't explain why, but I can't let you have this book back. I'm sorry, but there it is. Come on, Ri." She turned and started walking away. Puzzled, Rianne followed her. How could a simple name in a book make Deanna so frightened? She looked as shaken as if she'd just heard You-Know-Who was coming back. That thought almost brought Rianne to a halt. A single name that could inspire terror like no other... But no. It couldn't be, could it? A sense of foreboding rising up her spine, Rianne quickened her pace. Time to find Luella, and quickly.

Chapter Nineteen The Enemies of the Heir

"So what's the emergency then?" asked Marlie, puzzled. Deanna had burst in to Herbology, dragged both Marlie and Luella aside and whispered urgently to them that they had to go back to the dorm as soon as the lesson finished. She'd refused to be drawn on why, and Rianne hadn't been much help either. She'd just told them that it wasn't wise to say anything in public, and that they'd be able to hear all about it later.

So it was that all four of them were locked in their dorm, huddled round the fire, waiting expectantly to hear what Deanna had to say.

She opened her bag and began fumbling around. After a few minutes spent searching around, she produced the diary.

"What do you lot make of this?"

Marlie took it from her. "Looks ordinary enough to me."

Deanna laughed. "To you, maybe. Give it to Lu. See what she thinks."

Marlie, now really confused, handed the diary to Luella, equally bemused. She ran a finger along the spine, raising an eyebrow at the date, but otherwise making no comment. Until she opened the diary. As she scanned the blank pages, the blood drained out of her face and her eyes widened in horror. Shuddering, she thrust the diary away from her.

Rianne was by her side in a second. "Lu! What's wrong? Are you alright?"

Luella gasped for breath, literally having to force the words out. "That... thing... it's... evil!"

"It's just an old diary, Lu." Marlie snorted.

"It isn't." came Deanna's voice. "Lu knows it, and if your mum believed in not keeping things hidden from children as much as mine does, you'd know it too. Check out the name."

Marlie picked it up and read. "T. M. Riddle. Never heard of them."

"Not under that name. But the whole magical world knows his alias." Deanna took in a deep breath, readying herself for the next announcement. "T. M. Riddle is Voldemort."

Marlie immediately thrust the diary away. "What?" she shrieked. "That's impossible!"

"You-Know-Who - Deanna, are you sure?" gasped Rianne.

Deanna nodded. "Quite sure. Mum told me. I asked her once who Voldemort was, where he'd come from, and she told me the whole story. He was born Tom Marvolo Riddle, son of a wealthy Muggle and a witch who was living in poverty in his village, preferring that to living with her own family. They got married, but she didn't tell him she was a witch until afterwards, when she was pregnant with their first born son. Needless to say, he threw her out. She died soon after in childbirth, but lived long enough to name him Tom for his father and Marvolo for hers." Deanna smiled in the firelight, an odd, twisted little smile with no humour in it. "Her name was Messalina Malfoy."

"Malfoy?" Marlie gaped. "You mean Voldie's a Malfoy?"

"Why am I not surprised?" sighed Rianne. "What amazes me is that he's a half-blood. You live and learn."

"Of course he's a half-blood." whispered Luella. "He's the First Heir, he has to be at least part Muggle."

"But he hates Muggles." said Marlie, bewildered.

"Exactly." said Deanna. "His Muggle father abandoned him, and the Muggle orphanage where he grew up apparently wasn't a lot of fun. Why would he like Muggles?"

Marlie wasn't to be put off. "But Harry Potter was brought up by Muggles who ill-treated him too, and he's not evil."

"He's also not half-Malfoy." Deanna reminded her.

"Messalina couldn't have been all bad - she liked Muggles enough to marry one, and it sounds like she didn't get on with the rest of the family." said Rianne thoughtfully.

"Exactly." said Deanna firmly. "And look what the result was. That family can't even rebel against itself without causing trouble."

"Yes, well, never mind about his history." snapped Marlie. "Question is, what's his school diary doing here?"

"I don't know." Deanna replied. "But this I do know - no good will come of this."

"No good already has!" Luella whispered, still shaking in Rianne's arms. "That is what's causing the attacks! Someone's using it to access Voldemort's power and open the Chamber!"

Silence. None of them wanted to believe it. And yet, it made sense. Made so much sense. Only an Heir of Slytherin could open the Chamber, and the diary was the only thing meeting that description, aside from Luella herself. Denial was one option. But all four of them were too much the Slytherin to be able to take it.

"Gods." whispered Deanna. Marlie didn't say anything, just backed away whimpering.

Rianne, however, was staring at the diary, eyes gleaming with cold.

"Maybe not."

"What do you mean?" Deanna looked at her, worried.

"Maybe someone's not using it. Maybe it's using someone to do its dirty work. Maybe it's alive."

All four of them drew back. That was just disturbing enough to be true. Who knew what Voldemort had done to it? He was capable of anything and twisted enough to do it.

"That's it." Marlie choked. "It's going. I don't care how we get rid of it, but I am not spending the night in the same room as that... that thing!" She picked up the diary and prepared to throw it into the fire. At least, she did until Deanna grabbed her by the wrist just in time.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she snarled at her friend.

"What d'you think I'm doing?" yelled Marlie. "I'm getting rid of it, of course. I mean it, Tyler. I am *not* having that thing anywhere near me any longer than I have to!"

"Well, I quite agree with you there, Marls." snapped Deanna. "But chucking it in the fire? What were you thinking of? It's a Dark object made by the worst Dark wizard out there, anything could have happened! You need to dispose of these things with great care and attention, you can't just throw them in the fire!"

"Well, what the hell do you suggest then!" raged Marlie.

That got her. Deanna seemed completely at a loss as to what to do.

"Er... Rianne? Any ideas?"

"Palm it off on to someone you don't like." Rianne said promptly.

"OK, and how about an ethical one, Ri? One that'll actually work."

"True." mused Rianne. "Suppose it's probably not a good idea to let Lockhart loose with something like this anyway, gods know what he'd do." She noticed Deanna and Marlie giving her a very odd look indeed. "What? Don't tell me you weren't thinking it too."

"We shall have to hand it in, you know." Luella's voice sounded small, sad and completely unsuited to someone her age. "Get it sorted out properly. We can't risk it falling into the wrong hands. Can't risk any more attacks."

"Hand it in." said Deanna levelly. "OK. Right. Yes, I'm sure that'll work brilliantly. I can just imagine one of the teachers just taking it off us without a second thought or asking us any questions, can't you? 'What's that, Deanna? Lord Voldemort's incredibly evil school diary? OK, I'll dispose of it for you. No problem.' Honestly, Lu, we're going to end up in front of the Headmaster in no time with a story like that."

"Don't suppose our mothers are going to be any good either, are they?" sighed Marlie. "Don't know about yours, but mine is going to have a few words to say to me if I send her that in the post. Not unless I can talk her into having an amnesty on Dark objects at work or something, but I think she might suspect something."

Rianne slammed her fist into her hand. "That's it!"

Marlie blinked. "What, talk my mum into declaring an amnesty on Dark objects? Ri, you're asking an awful lot here."

Rianne shook her head. "No, no. But there is someone who could get rid of it for us, someone who'll believe us."

"Who?" Deanna leapt at the chance to solve their problems.

"Snape, of course. He likes us. He'll believe us. He won't do anything like automatically report us to Dumbledore. And he's mates with your mothers, isn't he? He can pass it on your mum, Marlie, make up some story about how he got it, and she can then dispose of it properly. Problem solved!" Rianne leant back, grinning smugly.

The other three exchanged looks.

"I'm not sure about this." said Marlie doubtfully. "He might still ask lots of probing questions."

"But on the other hand, what other choice do we have?" sighed Deanna. "I don't want this thing hanging around here!"

"I say we do it." said Luella firmly. "I'll do the talking; I've discussed the possibility of what might be causing the attacks before with him. He won't be suspicious if I tell him I found it. Which I sort of did."

"Yeah, where did it come from anyway?" Deanna asked curiously. "Harry said he just found it lying around, and you were there at the time."

"It's true." Luella confirmed. "He wanted to ask me about the Heir of Slytherin legends so we went to Moaning Myrtle's toilet to talk in private, and he found it lying on the floor. When he said it was blank, I told him to keep it. Damn it, why didn't I check it out! Why?" Luella cursed her own stupidity.

"Never mind, Lu." Rianne patted her shoulder. "We know now. And it's not like there's been any attacks since. We'll just take it to Snape tonight, after dinner, hand it in, and everything'll be fine. Don't worry. Everything'll be just fine."

"I hope so." Luella whispered. "I really do hope so."

Deanna checked her watch. "Well, nearly dinner time, folks. Snape may well not be in over dinner, so what do we do with this thing until then? And might I just state that I'm not happy about carrying it around with me? Especially not with Malfoy around who has seen it and is now itching to get his hands on it."

"Well we can't leave it here." said Marlie. "Not unattended - anyone could walk right in and take it."

"They wouldn't." Deanna fingered her wand. "I didn't spend four years building a reputation as a violent, unpredictable psychopath for nothing. Trust me, we could leave the entire Tal-y-Rhys fortune in that common room, and if it were widely known that it belonged to me, no one'd touch it. No one with any sense'll come in here."

"Maybe." said Marlie dubiously, not sharing Deanna's confidence. "But I don't want to risk it."

Rianne picked up her own wand. "Leave it to me. *Wingardium Leviosa!*" She pointed her wand at a loose flagstone, which promptly rose about a foot in the air to reveal a small hollow just big enough to contain the diary. A few flicks of the wand later, and the flagstone was back in place, looking as if it had never been disturbed. Except with one important difference - this time, the little black book was entombed beneath it.

"Ingenious." breathed Marlie.

"Indeed. Except you've forgotten one thing." Deanna pointed out. "Anyone could get that off with a Levitation Charm, couldn't they?"

"Not," Rianne replied coldly, "if you use one of your Amazing Patented Rock Classic Tyler Locking Charms, they won't."

"Yeah, go on Tyler, you're always saying how secure they are." Marlie chimed in.
"Let's see one."

"You reckon." Deanna smiled thinly.

"Look at it this way." Luella pointed out. "Malfoy and friends'll spend hours trying to work out how to get it open. They're not going to know any Muggle tunes, are they?"

"No, suppose not." Deanna stroked her chin thoughtfully. "Alright, which one shall I use?"

"Hey Jude."

"Chain Reaction."

"Ride On Time."

Deanna sighed. Why, why, did her friends have to have such weird musical tastes? Rianne listened to the same records her mother did, Luella had this weird and quite frankly disturbing penchant for dance tunes, and as for Marlie, well. Her collection could keep the London Astoria's Camp Attack night going for weeks.

"Out of all that lot, Rianne's is perhaps the least sad, but if you think I'm using any, you've got another think coming." She rolled up her sleeves. "I shall use Enter Sandman. Excuse me."

Murmuring a few words, she wove a pattern of light over the flagstone, sealing it down, before shouting "*Aromohola!*" and deftly tapping out the introduction to Enter Sandman. The light flared then vanished.

"Done." smiled Deanna, satisfied. "Let's see anyone get past that! Come on, you guys. Dinner."

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Ginny hastily dived round the corner as the four girls approached the door. It wouldn't do to get caught, not now, not when she was so close. Holding her breath in sheer terror, she listened as the dorm's occupants left for dinner, securely locking the door behind them.

Slowly, far too slowly, their footsteps echoed down the corridor, growing ever fainter. Finally, several eternities later, they disappeared. Ginny left her hiding place and made straight for the door. It didn't take long before it was open. Six months of life in the Slytherin common room had given Ginny more than a passing acquaintance with Muggle music, and the opening bars of Hey Jude were familiar enough. Besides, Rianne nearly always used that one when it was her turn to set the dorm combination lock, when she didn't use something by Fleetwood Mac anyway. The things you learned when you hung around these people for long enough.

As she entered the dorm, she felt a twinge of guilt about what she was doing. They'd done so much for her after all. And here she was, repaying them by robbing them. It didn't take much to imagine how Deanna would react upon discovering someone had taken her stuff. Yet it wasn't really theirs, was it? And she couldn't let them keep it, much less hand it in. If Snape got his hands on it, it wouldn't be long before he managed to unlock its secrets, and after that, it would only be a matter of time before

he discovered who its previous owner had been. She couldn't risk that. If her parents had been disappointed in her before, they'd be ready to disown her if it got out she'd been attacking Muggle-borns. She knew Tom well enough to know that he'd be unlikely to tell Snape what had really been going on. No, there was no help for it. She just had to get that diary back.

Question was, which flagstone was it under? Near the fire, she knew that much. But peering through a knot hole as she had been, she hadn't had the best view in the world. Only one thing for it.

"*Sensor Incantatem!*" she whispered, holding her wand out, running it over the stones. At first, the wand remained silent. Until she moved it over one stone in particular, and it started to glow, producing the illusion of a padlock, which floated in the air before disappearing.

"Got you!" Dropping to her knees, she examined it closely. The spell had revealed a network of magical bonds holding it firmly in place. The Alohomora Charm would release it, but not without a combination. Enter Sandman, hadn't it been? She tapped out the chorus as best she could.

And found herself flung back across the floor as the charm screamed in protest. Not the right bit evidently, either that or she'd tapped it wrong. And yet she could have sworn that was how it went. Frowning, she reached for Marlie's Walkmage, left lying carelessly by her bed, before hastily going through Deanna's record collection.

Before long, the Black Album was playing away. Maybe it was the intro she'd used, Ginny thought. She played it a few times just to be sure, before tapping it out onto the stone.

Success! The Locking Charm glowed, rippled and changed to pale green before her eyes. Ginny rubbed her hands gleefully. Two elementary charms later, and the diary was cradled in her arms once more. Replacing the flagstone, she got swiftly to her feet, pausing only to return the Walkmage to its place by the bed. Then, diary hidden beneath her robes, she made a hasty exit.

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"Come on then. Let's get this over with." Deanna sighed as she pushed the door open.
"Which stone was it under?"

"This one." replied Rianne, striding straight over to the stone she'd earlier hidden the diary under and patting it, confident she'd found the right one.

"Right." Deanna knelt by it and tapped out the code. They waited. Nothing happened.

Deanna frowned. "That's odd." She tried again. Still nothing.

"Maybe you did it wrong." Marlie suggested.

Deanna glared at her. " I did not do it wrong! That's the code, exactly as I tapped it in!"

"Maybe it's the wrong stone." Luella said timidly.

"Of course it's the right one. It was this one, I swear it." snapped Rianne.

Deanna got up. "*Sensor Incantatem!*" She began sweeping her wand over the floor, trying to seek out the enchanted stone. Nothing.

"It has to be round here somewhere!" she muttered, unable to figure out what had gone wrong. "Come on, where are you, you little bastard..."

Rianne was still staring at the first stone she tried. "I'm still sure it was this one." she whispered.

"So what happened to the charm then?" asked Marlie.

"I don't know." said Rianne. "Unless..." A horrible suspicion began to dawn on her. Raising her wand, she cast a charm on the stone. "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The stone rose steadily into the air. Deanna stopped dowsing and joined the rest of them as they peered into the cavity left behind. Sure enough, the hollow was still there. But no diary.

"We've been robbed." whispered Deanna.

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Half an hour later, and it still hadn't sunk in.

"Who?" Deanna hissed, feeling personally attacked that someone had dared break in to their dorm and even worse, circumvented her security charms. "Who would dare do a thing like this?"

"Easy enough." laughed Rianne bitterly. "Malfoy. Got to be. He knew we had the diary, wanted a look, so broke in while we were at dinner. Damn him."

Luella looked dubious. "I'm not sure. I mean, yeah it could have been, but someone would have noticed him hanging about, surely?"

"OK, so he sent Pansy Parkinson in to do it for him." said Rianne dismissively. "But the fact remains he's still the number one suspect."

"But how'd they get past the charm?" Luella frowned.

"They must have heard me saying what I was going to use." Deanna sighed. "Damn it. And Malfoy was there when we got the Firebolts too. When we explained to Ginny how the charms worked. Gods damn it!" She pounded her hand in frustration.

"At least he doesn't seem to know what the diary really is." Rianne pointed out. "Or how to use it."

"He doesn't need to know how to use it." snarled Deanna. "All that has to happen is for it to use him."

"Don't." Marlie shuddered. "That's all we need, Lord Voldemort using Malfoy as a tool. The school'd be Muggle-born free in weeks. Less, even."

"That does it." said Rianne. "We've got to get that diary back. Before it's too late."

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Which was why the following day found Draco Malfoy ambushed on the way to his History of Magic lesson, dragged into a side corridor and thrust up against the wall.

"Where is it?" snarled Deanna. "What have you done with it?"

"Done with what?" yelled Draco. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Don't give me that!" she hissed, tightening her grip. "What the hell did you do with that diary?"

"What diary?" asked Draco, genuinely perplexed.

"You know exactly what diary!" Deanna hissed. "The one you tried to take off Harry yesterday!"

"Oh!" Draco began to grin. "That diary!"

"Yes, that diary! Where is it?!"

Draco shrugged. "Haven't the foggiest, Tyler. Why, lost it have we? Potter won't like that. Very careless of you, you know."

"Shut... up!" Deanna snapped, slamming him against the wall again. "I didn't lose it. It got stolen. Don't try and act the innocent with me, Malfoy! I know it was you!"

Draco just rolled his eyes, and turned to his cousin, who was leaning against the opposite wall, watching proceedings with interest. "Lovegood, kindly talk some sense into your friend here. She seems to have this paranoid delusion that I'm obsessed with her belongings and always up to no good."

"Wonder where she got that idea from." observed Marlie.

"No idea, Lovegood." said Draco innocently. "I'd never do anything like that."

"Liar." snarled Deanna. "Malfoy, just cut the crap and hand it over. I'm not going anywhere without it."

"You could be here a while then." Draco commented. "Still, if you really *want* to spend that much time in such close proximity to me..." He let the sentence trail off, leering at her. Deanna backed away in revulsion, but did not let him go.

"Marlie. Just sort this out once and for all. Is he lying, or has hell finally frozen over?"

Marlie fingered her Snitch necklace. "Malfoy, did you steal the diary?"

"No." snapped Draco, his patience starting to wear thin. "I didn't. Happy now?"

Marlie nodded sadly. "He's telling the truth, DT. You'd better let him go."

Deanna released him, too stunned to argue. Draco straightened his robes.

"Thank you, Lovegood. And now you've finished harassing me, can I go? I do have a lesson to get to, after all."

"I'm not stopping you." Deanna retorted, more in bitterness and frustration than anger. Draco just smirked at her, before stalking off. However, he couldn't resist flinging one last insult at her.

"Like I'd want anything of yours anyway!" he jeered, before turning away and disappearing.

"Arsehole." Deanna muttered, turning to Marlie. "So now what?" Marlie didn't answer. "Marls?"

"What?" asked Marlie absently. She was staring at the space where Draco had been before swaggering off, frowning and fingered her necklace.

"I said, now what do we do?" Deanna repeated. "Marls, what are you thinking?"

"Doesn't matter." said Marlie hastily, dropping the necklace and turning on the charm. "Just trying to figure out why Malfoy's such a git."

"Get anywhere?" asked Deanna.

Marlie shook her head. "No."

"There's a surprise. Come on then, we'd better go and find Lu and Ri. Let them know what we found out."

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"Not Malfoy?" Rianne could hardly believe her ears. "But... who was it then?"

Marlie shrugged. "Don't know. But there it is. I asked him straight out. He denied it. And the necklace said he was telling the truth. It's not him, Ri. I'd swear to it."

"The necklace could be wrong." Rianne suggested. Marlie's eyes narrowed.

"My necklace is *never* wrong." she snapped.

"OK, OK." said Rianne hastily. "So if not Malfoy, who? Who else even knew about the diary?"

"Harry." said Deanna. "He was there when we got it."

Rianne shook her head. "Nah. Has to be a Slytherin - no one else knows our password. Who else was there?"

Deanna thought. "Well, Ginny and her friends were there, but it wouldn't have been one of them, surely?"

"Ginny wouldn't do a thing like that." stated Marlie. "She's not a thief."

"Who does that leave then?" asked Rianne.

"No one." sighed Deanna. "Not unless the diary teleported itself out of there somehow."

"Don't." shivered Marlie. "I don't want to think about that!"

"Well, there aren't very many other options left, are there?" Rianne snapped.

None of them had anything to say to that. Luella, however, was doing some very serious thinking. Something had occurred to her. Something she'd discussed with Snape before, but had since forgotten about.

"I need to find Ginny." she announced.

"Ginny? Whatever for?" Deanna asked in surprise.

"What, now?" gasped Marlie. "Lu, lessons are about to start, you'll get in trouble!"

"Never mind! This is far more important!" Luella yelled over her shoulder as she took off down the corridor.

The other three watched her go.

"What has she thought of now?" sighed Rianne.

Deanna shook her head. "I don't know, but I really wish she'd share these brainwaves of hers with us before she goes running off. It's very annoying."

Marlie watched after her anxiously. "Do you reckon we should go after her? Keep her out of trouble, like?"

Rianne checked her watch. "We'll be late."

"Rianne, we've got Herbology next. Sprout's usually pretty lenient about that sort of thing, most that'll happen is that we lose a few points." Deanna beckoned them both after her. "Let's go."

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Luella raced down the corridors, mind on fire with possibility. Ginny had been there when Deanna had confiscated the diary. Ginny knew how Deanna's Locking Charms worked. She was familiar with the tunes the four of them used to secure the dorm door with. As a female Slytherin, she would have been able to eavesdrop without looking too suspicious. And then there was that morning back in January, when Luella had felt Ginny fight off an attack. There was far more to this young first year than met the eye. And while Luella had no doubt that Ginny was no Dark witch, nevertheless there were some serious questions to be answered, and Luella had a feeling that Ginny might hold some of the answers.

Now, what class did Ginny have first thing on a Tuesday? Transfiguration, wasn't it? She headed for McGonagall's classroom, all the while keeping an eye out for the first year.

And then she saw her. A glimpse of red hair walking down a side corridor. Luella ran after her, shouting her name. "Ginny!"

The girl turned round a corner and disappeared from view. And then Luella heard it, a voice that made her blood run cold.

"Let me rip.... let me tear.... I hunger.... I want blood..." She'd never heard a voice like it in her life. Cold, cruel and utterly inhuman, it was surely the voice of some kind of monster. A monster that could be causing the attacks... And then all doubts were removed as the familiar pain ripped through her arm, causing her to double up. But not for long. It was surprising what you could put up with when someone you cared about was in danger.

"Oh my god... *Ginny, watch out!*" Luella screamed, breaking into a sprint. Rounding the corner, she drew her wand out, ready to do battle.

And stopped. No monster. No Ginny. No pain in her arm. The corridor was empty. Almost empty. Except for a figure lying crumpled in the middle of the floor. It didn't have red hair.

Slowly, keeping an eye out for any sign of movement, Luella approached the figure. It was a girl, wearing Hogwarts robes with the blue and bronze trim that signified Ravenclaw. As Luella drew nearer, she cast all caution to the wind as she recognised the victim.

"Oh god. Oh no." she wept, racing to the fallen girl's side. "Dear god, no, Penny, not you." Luella buried her face her hands and sobbed helplessly.

For it was indeed none other than Penelope Clearwater, lying Petrified on her back, glasses cast to one side, a cleaning cloth in her other hand, evidently caught in the act of polishing the lenses.

"Not you, cous. Not you." Luella whispered, stroking her cousin's hair. "Whoever did this will pay for this, I swear. I swear it, Penny!"

She heard footsteps behind her. Snatching up her wand, she spun round. And froze in horror as she came face to face with a stunned Professor McGonagall.

"What happened here?" the teacher whispered, shocked.

"Professor, I swear I didn't do it, I just found her like this, I promise!" Luella gasped, terrified beyond measure. If Harry Potter had been under suspicion after getting found at the scene, how much worse was it going to be for her, a Slytherin?

McGonagall appeared to gather her wits. Striding forward, she grabbed Luella by the arm and hauled her to her feet.

"Come along. We need to see the Headmaster about this." Ignoring Luella's protestations, she dragged the girl away.

It was at this point that Deanna, Marlie and Rianne arrived on the scene.

"What the...?" gasped Rianne. "Professor, what on earth's going on?"

Deanna took in Luella's pale, tear-stained face. "Lu, what the hell happened?"

"There's been another attack." McGonagall informed them. "And your friend here was found at the scene. I'm taking her to see the Headmaster now."

"What?" gasped Marlie. "Another attack?" She peered around McGonagall. "Oh my god, Penny!" She rushed to her cousin's side, cradling her head in her lap.

"But she didn't do it! She couldn't have!" Deanna cried.

"Professor, she was talking to us not ten minutes ago and then went off to look for Ginny Weasley. It wasn't her, it couldn't have been." Rianne protested.

"Be that as it may, the Headmaster will have to be informed." McGonagall told them sternly. "And I am taking Miss Martin there right now. As for you three, don't you have lessons to go to?"

"What about Penelope?" said Marlie quietly, not taking her eyes off her cousin.

McGonagall conjured up a stretcher and levitated the Ravenclaw on to it. The stretcher then moved away without a sound.

"She's on her way to the hospital wing now. Madam Pomfrey will take care of her. Now I'll say it again. Get to your lessons. I will deal with this." She led Luella away.

The three girls watched her go. Deanna turned to Rianne in horror.

"But she's innocent! She couldn't have done it, she couldn't have!" Deanna gasped, even paler than usual. "They can't expel her, surely!"

Marlie got to her feet. "Dumbledore's not a god, Deanna. If he's persuaded she did it, she'll be out of here."

"No." whispered Deanna. "They can't. They won't. Not Lu, not my best mate, they can't! They just can't!" She choked on the last words, wiping the tears away.

"They won't." said Rianne, decisive as ever. "Come on. We've got to find Snape and fast."

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Luella didn't say a word as McGonagall led her through the passageways of Hogwarts. I'm expelled, she thought. I'm going to be packing my bags for the next train home. My parents are going to kill me. God knows what it'll do to Deanna. And as for Snape... She didn't even want to think about how he'd react. He'd said that there was only one thing that'd ever make him turn from her - the "deliberate and wanton betrayal of everything he'd ever taught her." She hung her head in misery. Oh, how he was going to love this...

"Sherbert Lemon!" snapped McGonagall as she halted outside a stone gargoyle. Luella blinked in amazement as it leapt to one side and saluted, revealing a narrow passageway leading upwards. Luella supposed that this must be the way to Dumbledore's office. She was feeling too terrified to be impressed though.

The passageway came to an end outside a wooden door. McGonagall knocked. From inside, Luella heard Professor Dumbledore answer. "Come in."

Dumbledore looked up and raised an eyebrow to see Luella there. However, he didn't say anything.

"Professor, I..." McGonagall hesitated, before shrugging and jumping in. "There... There's been another attack."

Luella had expected him to leap to his feet in horror, to look worried or frightened. It was what she'd have expected Snape to do. Dumbledore however just bowed his head in resignation, almost as if he'd expected something like this to happen.

"Who?" he asked.

"Penelope Clearwater. Fifth year Ravenclaw." McGonagall took a deep breath, preparing for her next announcement. "And... I found this young Slytherin at the scene." Luella winced at the way she'd said 'Slytherin'. The deputy Headmistress had sounded oddly like Snape sneering at a misbehaving Gryffindor. Luella shivered. Professor Snape, where are you? she thought unhappily.

Dumbledore didn't respond. He fixed McGonagall with those enigmatic blue eyes of his, looking at her over his glasses.

"And?"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" snapped McGonagall.

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair, apparently unbothered by these revelations.

"I haven't the foggiest idea, my dear Professor McGonagall. What do you think I should do?"

That threw her. McGonagall's mouth opened and closed, words failing her. Luella suppressed the urge to smile. Headmasters weren't supposed to act like this, but she wasn't complaining. Any deviation from the expected script of "GET OUT OF MY SCHOOL AND NEVER DARKEN ITS DOOR AGAIN!" had to be a good thing.

And then the cavalry arrived. Footsteps pounded up the stairs and the door burst open to admit Professor Snape, robes billowing, on fire with righteous anger, emotions rallied to defend his threatened protégée.

"Headmaster, what is going on here?" he snarled. "Surely you don't believe that this child is responsible for Petrifying her fellow pupils?"

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "Severus! Have people really been saying that?"

"Someone obviously has." Snape shot back. "Or she'd be in lessons, where she's meant to be. Is that not right, Minerva?" He rounded on the Head of Gryffindor, daring her to explain herself.

McGonagall, to her credit, refused to be cowed. "Severus, there has been another attack. Miss Martin was found at the scene."

"So I heard." said Snape coldly. "I just got dragged out of a lesson by three hysterical Slytherins telling me she was about to be expelled and I had to do something. Headmaster, I do hope this isn't true."

"Expelled? My dear Severus, I hadn't even considered the possibility. Do *you* think she should be expelled?" Dumbledore leaned forward earnestly.

"Well, of course not!" snapped Severus in exasperation. "She's done nothing wrong!"

"Severus, she was on the scene!" shouted McGonagall. "I found her stooped over the girl's body with her wand in hand. Now, innocent or not, some explanation is surely required. She might be a favourite of yours, but that doesn't mean she's incapable of doing anything wrong!"

Snape dismissed her words with a wave of the hand. "It proves nothing. Of course she had her wand out - don't tell me you've not been walking around the school with your

hand on your wand lately. She could have just arrived and been checking the girl was alright. Did you actually see her Petrify her?"

"Well... no." McGonagall admitted.

"Exactly." Snape folded his arms, affecting an air of righteous indignation. "Honestly, all it takes is for one Slytherin to be found in a mildly compromising position and you're frogmarching her off to the Headmaster. I really don't believe you sometimes, Minerva."

McGonagall opened her mouth to snap something rather nasty back at him, but was prevented from doing so by Dumbledore motioning for silence.

"Aren't you two forgetting something in all of this?"

The two teachers turned to look at him quizzically.

"Just that there is one person whose opinion you have yet to ask." said Dumbledore mildly.

"Who would that be then?" snapped McGonagall.

"Why, Miss Martin of course." smiled Dumbledore. "Here you both are arguing over whether she was involved or not, and yet neither of you have thought to ask her if she actually did it."

McGonagall looked uncomprehendingly at him, as if the concept of students admitting to misdeeds voluntarily was a new one to her. To be fair to her, it wasn't a common occurrence, especially where Slytherins were concerned.

Snape, however, was beginning to smile. "How remiss of us, Headmaster. We do apologise. Why don't you ask her yourself? Get the matter sorted out once and for all."

"Certainly, Severus." He leaned forward, placing both elbows on the desk, addressing Luella directly for the first time. While he wasn't exactly smiling, nevertheless his manner was not unkind. "Miss Martin, were you responsible for the attack on Miss Clearwater?"

"No." whispered Luella. "What about the attacks on Mr. Finch-Fletchley, Mr. Creevey and Mrs. Norris?"

Luella shook her head. "No. No, it wasn't me. I don't know who it was."

Dumbledore leaned back, satisfied. "Thank you, Miss Martin. Severus, are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly, Headmaster."

"And you, Minerva?" Dumbledore gazed intently at her. McGonagall's mouth opened and closed a few times before setting in a firm line.

"I suppose I shall have to be." she sniffed. "If you aren't even going to try and investigate. Severus, I leave her to you. Good day." She turned on her heel and swept out. As soon as the door closed, Severus raced to Luella's side.

"Miss Martin, are you alright?" His voice was level, but his eyes burned with concern, betraying his real feelings to anyone who cared to look.

"I'm fine." Luella whispered. "Thank you." She squeezed the hand that was clutching the arm of her chair. Severus smiled thinly, patting her shoulder. However, his eyes told another story - that she was not out of danger just yet. He turned away from her to address the Headmaster.

"Albus, she is not under suspicion, is she?"

Dumbledore finally allowed himself a smile. "No, Severus, she is not. Rest assured that Miss Martin will be with us a little while longer. I'm not one to jump to conclusions at the mere sight of a Slytherin in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Severus said, breathing a sigh of relief. He turned back to Luella, extending a hand to her. "Come, Miss Martin. Let's get you back to your common room. Your friends will be worried about you." He led Luella out of Dumbledore's office.

Once on the stairs outside, Severus cast off all pretence at keeping his emotions under control, spinning round and grabbing Luella by the shoulders.

"What the hell were you thinking of?" he snarled at her. "Running off on your own, when you were *meant* to be in lessons I might add, with the current situation regarding Muggle-borns being what it is, especially you being who you are, anything could have happened to you, it could have been you lying Petrified in the hospital wing, you could have been expelled or worse..." He choked on the last word, releasing her and turning away, his face in shadow. "Please don't do that again." he whispered. "Don't take any risks like that, don't put yourself in danger. You're too valuable, we need you, you're far too important to lose to some random accident. Do you understand me?"

Luella nodded mutely, too struck by his obvious concern to snap at him.

"Good." He stepped forward, re-emerging into the torchlight. To her surprise, he was smiling once more, although the strain in his eyes was obvious. "You had me worried for a while there. Deanna and your friends came bursting into my lesson all shouting at once, telling me you'd been caught attacking students, were going to be expelled, and gods know what else. I didn't know what to think. But you are alright now."

"I'm fine." Luella reassured him. "Sir, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to put you through all that. But I had this hunch to follow up, and then I heard this voice wanting to kill

something, so I ran after it, and found Penny lying there. Then McGonagall found me and thought I'd done it. Thanks for sticking up for me."

"No trouble. I'm getting rather used to it now." came the dry response. "Being the twenty four hour non-stop support service for troubled Slytherins becomes second nature after a while. Besides it's not often I get to put one over Minerva McGonagall." He became serious. "Well-intentioned though they might be, your friends appear to have complicated matters. The whole Gryffindor and Ravenclaw first year now know there's been another attack and that you were found there. I shall have to have words with Professors Flitwick and McGonagall, see if we can't halt the worst of the rumours. And I'm sure Dumbledore will have to make some kind of announcement. However, there's no getting around the fact that your life is going to become incredibly difficult over the next few weeks. Are you sure you'll be alright?"

"I think so." Luella replied. "I can always use Glamoury, keep unnoticed. I'm used to it, trust me. My biggest problem will be preventing Deanna from attacking anyone who says anything."

"True enough." laughed Snape. "Just like her mother, that one. Yes, please try and keep her out of trouble. We don't need her adding to Madam Pomfrey's troubles. Which brings me to another point. From now on, you are going to have to be impeccably behaved. Get your work done on time and to the best standard you possibly can. Don't break even the most minor of school rules. You need to keep your record clean, try and be as unobtrusive as possible. Give your enemies nothing to pick up on. And at the other extreme, don't go out of your way to get points or otherwise distinguish yourself. You don't want to be noticed at all if you can help it. Got that?"

"Understood." Luella nodded. "Besides, like I said before, it's what I've always done anyway."

"Good." He patted her on the shoulder. "The practice should come in useful. I think you will come through it just fine, but don't think it will be easy. If you need me, for any reason at all, come and find me. I'm here for you, Luella. Remember that." His eyes burned into hers. I always do, she thought, feeling herself going weak at the knees.

It was Snape who broke the contact first. "You had best go back to your common room. I'll take you back there myself. Your friends are already there. Don't worry about missing your lesson, I'll tell Professor Sprout what happened."

"Thank you, sir." Luella murmured as she followed him back to the Nest. However, despite his reassuring presence, her fear would not go away. That voice she'd heard was still slithering in her ears. She didn't think she'd forget it in a hurry. Especially knowing that its owner was still lurking in the school somewhere. And that the cousin she cared about had been its most recent victim. Above and beyond all that, however, was a strange feeling of foreboding, that although she'd been cleared, something still loomed over the horizon. That despite everything, the worst was yet to come.

Much as Snape had predicted, the Gryffindor common room was abuzz with rumours. The first years had rushed in from Potions all talking at once about how there'd been another attack and this time, a prime suspect.

"They caught someone? Who?" asked Fred curiously, overhearing a wide-eyed Marianne Johnson telling her sister all about it.

"One of the Slytherins!" the first year whispered. "Three of them came rushing into Potions telling Professor Snape that one of them had been caught at the scene and was going to be expelled. You should have seen Professor Snape's reaction, he was off at once. Don't think I've ever seen him move so fast."

"And you got the lesson off!" laughed Angelina. "Nice one, sis!"

Marianne pulled a face. "Not really. He just told us all to stay in the classroom until he got back. Twenty minutes later, he turned up again and got on with teaching as if nothing had happened."

"Never mind." Angelina comforted her. "Maybe next time."

"Yeah, but you still haven't told us who it was." Fred pointed out.

The first year thought for a bit. "Erm... I didn't catch her name. But it was one of those fourth years you're always hanging around with. Lila, Layla, something like that."

"Luella?" Fred suggested.

"That's it!" Marianne snapped her fingers. "Luella. Knew it was something unusual. Yeah, that's her."

Fred blinked in confusion. Luella Martin? The Heir of Slytherin? Somehow he doubted it. Frowning, he walked over to where his brother was sitting and filled him in on this latest news.

"Lu Martin?" George stared at him. "But she IS Muggle-born, why on earth would she want to attack them?"

"That's what I want to know." said Fred firmly. "Come on, let's go and find Marls. See what's really going on."

The twins slipped out unnoticed. A few minutes later, Harry, Ron and Hermione turned up, desperate for news.

Normally Hermione didn't have much to do with her dorm mates. The constant gossiping about boys, clothes and make-up left her cold and unfulfilled. However, there were some occasions when gossiping was necessary.

"Lavender, what's going on?" Hermione gasped. "Everyone's saying there's been another attack. What happened?"

"Haven't you heard yet?" Lavender purred. "They say they've caught the Heir red-handed."

"Red-handed?" Both boys pulled up chairs so they could listen in.

"Who was it?" asked Ron, enthralled. "Have they been expelled yet?"

"Who was being attacked?" asked Harry anxiously. "Are they OK?"

"Penelope Clearwater." Parvati told them. "Ravenclaw fifth year. She's in the hospital wing with the others. Petrified but OK. But that's not the big news. Apparently the Heir of Slytherin was found stooped over her with her wand. They're expelling her now, so everyone says."

"Her?" asked Ron quietly.

"Yeah, her." Parvati nodded. "It was one of the Slytherin fourth years."

Next to Hermione, Harry felt his blood run cold. "Which one?" he croaked, barely managing to force the words out.

"Luella Martin." Lavender told them. Turning to Parvati, she added "They do always say it's the quiet ones you have to watch."

Harry didn't hear her. All he was aware of was the room starting to go blurry as his mind struggled to digest this information. Luella... the Heir of Slytherin? A Dark Witch? Attacking Muggle-borns? Expelled? It wasn't true. It couldn't be. His senses fought against what he was hearing. No way was Luella responsible for the attacks, he thought. It just wasn't possible. She must have been set up somehow. But that still left the very real possibility of her being expelled. That thought hit him harder than the idea of her turning evil. At least that was too surreal to make an impact. But the thought of losing Luella for good, of never seeing her again, that was all too horribly possible.

"No way." he whispered. "No way."

"Harry, I'm so sorry." Hermione said quietly, trying to comfort him.

"It's not true." Harry said, turning to face her, his voice rising to a scream. "It isn't true! Luella isn't the Heir of Slytherin, she just can't be! She can't!" He shouted the last sentence for the entire common room to hear.

"Well of course not." came the voice of George Weasley, cutting through the silence. "She can't be attacking Muggle-borns, she is one."

"Exactly, my dear George." said Fred as he followed his brother into the common room. "And if you'd all bothered to get your facts straight instead of believing every rumour you heard, you'd have all realised that."

Harry got to his feet and staggered gratefully over to them. "What... what happened?" he choked. "Is she OK?"

"She's fine." George grinned. "Not in trouble, cleared by Dumbledore himself, certainly not going to be expelled. So you can stop worrying, Harry."

"Thank god." Harry whispered. "So what did happen to her?"

"Well, Marls reckons she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was first on the scene, and had the bad luck to get found there by McGonagall. That's all." Fred looked meaningfully at his housemates.

"So she's not the Heir then?" asked Harry, relieved.

"No." said George.

"She didn't do it?" asked Hermione.

"No." said Fred, smiling.

"She's not expelled?" asked Ron, a trace of disappointment in his voice.

"No." said both twins together.

The Gryffindors nodded and returned to discussing other things, disappointed that the truth was so mundane.

Harry, relieved that Luella wasn't about to be expelled after all, sank into a chair.

"Thank god that's over." he sighed.

"I must say, I didn't think it could be true." Hermione observed, joining him. "A Muggle-born attacking other Muggle-borns - it just doesn't make sense. Does it, Ron? Ron?"

Ron had remained standing and was even now heading for the common room door.

"Ron, where are you off to?" Hermione called after him, puzzled.

"I won't be long." he answered. "There's just something I've got to do." Turning away, he left the room.

Hermione looked back at Harry. "Any idea where he's going?"

"No idea, Mione. He's not said anything to me."

"Too much to hope that he's going to be studying." Hermione sniffed, before reaching for her books. "Now, where were we? Ah yes, History of Magic, the 1612 Goblin Rebellion." Ignoring Harry's groans, she set to work.

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Outside Gryffindor Tower, Ron directed his footsteps downstairs, gritting his teeth in determination. This wasn't something he was looking forward to, and if Harry and Hermione ever found out where he was going, they'd probably disown him on the spot. However, he had little choice. Not now there'd been another attack. Knowing what he knew, he could hardly keep quiet now.

Yeah, but do you have to go to *him*, a little voice nagged at him. Stop it, he told himself. This is the only way to make sure Harry and Hermione never find me out. A feeble justification, he knew. Trying to convince himself he was trying to protect his friends as opposed to his reputation. But he didn't really have any other ideas. McGonagall would probably either dismiss his suspicions or be unable to act on them. After all, it certainly seemed that Snape and Dumbledore had been able to overrule her. However, even Dumbledore had to answer to the school governors.

Which is why he found himself heading for the dungeons, feeling sick to his stomach, but steeling himself for what he had to do anyway. Sometimes, you just had to make compromises.

He found his target quickly enough. The flash of silver-blond hair up ahead could belong to only one other, and it wasn't long enough to be hers. Ron slowed his pace, suddenly fearful, beginning to wonder if this was a good idea. Too late now. His target, hearing footsteps, had turned and seen him.

"Well, well, well." Draco Malfoy drawled. "Fancy that. Ron Weasley deigning to spend time down here with the likes of us. What's the matter, Gryff-boy, finally decided Slytherins are worthwhile human beings after all?" He stepped forward, Crabbe and Goyle close behind him, cracking their knuckles and glowering menacingly. Ron suddenly became very aware that he was alone, outnumbered and deep in Slytherin territory. However, he didn't chicken out.

"Cut it out, Malfoy." he snapped. "I need to talk to you. It's important."

"Important. I see." Draco looked unconvinced. "Ron Weasley has something important to tell me. Right."

Ron ignored the sarcasm. "It's about the Heir of Slytherin. I've got information on them."

Draco dropped the insolence at once, all ears about this. "Really?"

"Really." Ron nodded.

"How very interesting." Draco purred. "I'm intrigued. Go on then. Share your knowledge. And if it's sufficiently useful, I might even let you leave here unpunished."

Ron swallowed. "Alright. You'll be interested, I promise." Taking a deep breath, forcefully repressing the anguished protests of his conscience, he began to relate what he knew.

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Chapter Twenty The Heir Betrayed

"Well?" said Draco softly, his voice echoing round the small abandoned dungeon that they'd retreated to. "What do you know?"

"I don't have much." Ron admitted. "But I think I know who it is."

"Go on." Draco prodded. "Tell me."

Ron took a deep breath. "I think it's Luella Martin."

"Her!" Draco hissed. He exchanged looks with Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom were now gazing in ecstatic rapture. Ron looked from one to the other. A little frisson of some undescribable emotion that could have been delight, surprise, malice or any combination of the three had gone round the room as he'd said her name. Once more, those doubts as to the wisdom of this resurfaced, clouding the pleasure he'd felt at knowing that this idea was going to work.

"Yes, her." said Ron, wishing that unholy light in Draco's eyes would go out.

"But how..." said Draco in wonder. Awe gave way to animation. "Tell me how you found out! Tell me now!"

"Alright, alright." said Ron testily. And he began to relate his suspicions. How the three of them had found Luella at the scene of the first attack. How he'd overheard Rianne and Deanna discussing their fears that Luella was hiding something, implicated in some way, and that there was something up with her right arm. How they'd reacted with fury when he'd threatened to tell on them, as if there was some truth to the idea of Luella being the Heir. How Harry had guessed that she might be a Parselmouth. How Luella had appeared to suffer a burn on her arm during Potions while the attack on Justin Finch-Fletchley was going on - yet the potion she'd been working on didn't cause burns and was harmless to the skin. How Luella had seemed to know all about the legend of the Second Heir, despite being only a Muggle-born. And now she'd been caught virtually red-handed at the scene of the next attack.

The three Slytherins listened in silence, their faces becoming ever more ghoulish with each revelation. Finally Ron finished talking. There. It was done. Luella was surely on her way out of the school by now. One less Slytherin around, and he no longer had to worry about Harry getting taken advantage of. So why did this whole thing seem so wrong?

Draco was regarding him rather oddly. "Well now, Weasley, I won't say this hasn't been an interesting little conversation. You've given me some very useful information

here. However, there is one little thing that's still puzzling me, and you've not yet addressed it."

"What's that, Malfoy?" asked Ron halfheartedly, sickened by Draco so near to him and experiencing a strange urge to be gone somewhere far, far away where he could try and wash the taint off himself.

"Why are you telling me all this?" Draco asked. "I mean, we're not exactly friends, are we? And if you were acting purely out of concern that there's a Dark witch running loose around the school, you'd have gone to a teacher. But you came looking for me. And I want to know why."

Ron shrugged. "Your father's a governor. Dumbledore's obviously not going to kick her out, so I thought I'd better go to his boss. That's all."

"Really." Draco still looked incredibly calculating. "And your other reason being? Don't lie to me, Weasley, you still haven't told me all."

Ron hesitated. Draco could obviously sense the real reason behind this venture, and it didn't look like he was getting out of here without telling him. And yet, he was loath to reveal anything so personal to a sworn enemy.

"I've told you all you need to know." said Ron sharply. "You know who it is, you've got enough evidence to go on. Do what you have to, it's in your hands now. I'm going." He got to his feet and made to leave. However, he found his way blocked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Not so fast, Weasley." sneered Crabbe. "Malfoy's not finished with you yet."

"Yeah, he asked you a question, Gryff-boy." snarled Goyle. "And you ain't going nowhere until it gets answered."

"Get out of my way!" snapped Ron, trying to get past them. It was no use. He might as well have tried getting past a brick wall.

"Answer the question." hissed Crabbe, grabbing Ron by the front of his robes and forcing him up against the wall. "Before we have to beat it out of you."

Ron shot a glance at Draco. He was still sitting cross-legged on the floor, smiling a cold, malicious smile that indicated he had no intention of calling his bodyguards off. No hope of rescue there, not that Ron had really expected it. He fingered his wand. No hope there either. He'd be more likely to hurt himself than either of the Slytherins, unless they ended up laughing themselves to death.

"Alright." said Ron quietly. "Put me down and I'll tell you."

Draco picked himself up and joined his friends. "Oh, I think you can tell me equally well from where you are, don't you boys?" Crabbe and Goyle nodded in affirmation.

Ron gulped. No help but to admit it.

"What reason do I need?" said Ron coldly. "She's been attacking kids. The next one could die."

"And the rest?" said Draco softly.

Ron raised his head and looked Draco straight in the eyes. "Because you bastards have already stolen my sister, and now she's trying to get hold of my best mate too. I can't get rid of you all, but if I can save Harry from her, then I will. Is that what you wanted to hear, Malfoy?" He stared defiantly at the Slytherin. Draco was no longer smiling.

"So it is for such petty reasons that Ron Weasley turns traitor." he said quietly. He shook his head. "Potter was a fool to choose you. Deal with him, boys." Without another word, Draco turned and walked out.

Crabbe's lips curled in disgust. "You're not worth even fighting, Gryff-boy. At least Potter has honour. Come on, Goyle." He followed Malfoy out. Goyle nodded once and turned to leave, but not before drawing a fist back and punching Ron hard in the stomach. As Ron doubled up in agony, clutching his stomach, both Slytherins disappeared, leaving him there alone with his conscience.

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Draco did not think about Ron for long, however. Or, to put it more accurately, his distaste at Ron's reasons for betraying Luella wasn't strong enough to stop him making use of the information he'd provided. Oh, of course he didn't really believe Luella Martin was responsible. He knew the true legend of the Second Heir well enough to guess the real cause behind Luella's strange behaviour. However, if one didn't know the truth, but only knew that Salazar had left an Heir who was going to kill all the Muggle-borns, the evidence could be made to look rather damning indeed. Picturing the look on Pansy's face when he told her of these new developments, Draco quickened his pace. This was going to be fun.

A movement up ahead caught his attention. A flash of red hair. Not Weasley, surely? Not Ron, anyway. Intrigued, Draco followed. Unlikely to be Ron, not unless Crabbe and Goyle were losing their touch, but it might just be the only other Weasley likely to be down here.

Turning a corner, he spotted his target. He'd been right. Ginny Weasley it was. She was walking swiftly away from him, with something cradled in her arms. Quickening his pace, he caught up with her.

"Hey, Weasley. Where are you off to then?" grinned Draco, curious as to why yet another Weasley was so far from their common room. Although this time, there was less hostility involved. Despite himself, Draco had come to feel a genuine affection for the youngest Weasley, due in no small measure to her loudly informing not only her brother but the entire school that she'd rather be Slytherin than anything else.

Ginny nearly leapt a foot into the air. "N-nothing." she squeaked, trembling.

"Nothing?" Draco raised an eyebrow. Evidently Ginny hadn't completely managed convincingly hiding misbehaviour yet. Either that or something was up. He looked at the first year again, and noticed for the first time how pale and thin she looked. There were dark shadows under her eyes, as if she'd not been sleeping well lately, and all in all she did not look healthy. For all his air of cool disdain, Draco began to feel uncharacteristically worried. "Doesn't look like nothing. Ginny, are you alright?"

Ginny bit her lip uncertainly. Her lip trembled, and for a moment, Draco had the feeling she was about to tell him something. Then there came the sound of distant footsteps and the unmistakable sound of Crabbe and Goyle's voices.

The girl gasped and turned to run. It was then that Draco noticed the small black book in her arms.

"Is that what I think it is, Weasley?" Draco grinned, reaching for it. Ginny snatched the book away, holding it out of reach.

"Not so fast, you. Everyone's been doing their level best to keep that thing hidden from me, and I want to know why." Grabbing Ginny by the arm, he tried to grab the diary.

"No!" yelled Ginny. "Let go of me!" She struggled vainly in his arms as he tried to wrestle the diary off her. "Please, Malfoy, you're hurting me!"

"Give me the diary and I'll stop." said Draco through gritted teeth. "Come on, Weasley, make it easy on yourself."

"No!" shouted Ginny, still squirming. However, Draco was bigger than her and she was powerless to stop the diary slipping out of her grasp. With a cry of triumph, Draco pushed her away and snatched it up.

"Now to find out just what's so fascinating about this thing." He flipped the book open and stared. Blank. Every single page, blank. Just an ordinary Muggle diary. Nothing interesting at all.

"Is this it?" Draco demanded. "Just an empty diary? Is that what all the fuss was about?"

Ginny said nothing, her eyes not leaving the diary. Draco flicked to the front. Nothing there either, just the name 'T. M. Riddle'. It wasn't one he recognised, although at the back of his mind was the thought that somewhere surely he should know it, that he had heard it before. However, he couldn't place it, and he was in no mood to chase it, not when he had important business to discuss. Snapping the diary shut, he held it out to Ginny. "You might as well have it back then. I was hoping it had some juicy secrets of Potter's in it, but obviously not. Well?"

Ginny didn't answer. In fact, far from snatching the book back, she shrank from it.

"N-no." she stammered. "I - I don't want it. You have it."

Draco sighed. He just didn't get girls sometimes. "Alright, alright. Have it your way." He slipped the diary into his pocket, just as Crabbe and Goyle arrived on the scene, with Pansy Parkinson in tow.

"Hey, Malfoy, where'd you go?" Goyle asked. "We looked for you in the common room, but you weren't there."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "A good five minutes these idiots spent arguing over where you could be before I told them to try the 'Point me' charm. Good thing one of us has some sense." She noticed Ginny standing there. "Well, well, well. What's going on here?"

Ginny opened her mouth but no sound came out. While she'd seemed relatively brave with just Malfoy, the sight of Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy at her cruellest appeared to have terrified her into silence. Seeing this, and suddenly feeling the need to protect her, Draco jumped in.

"I was just having a little chat with her, that's all, Pan. But never mind her. Something's come up. I need to talk to you three in private. Come on." He beckoned them away, before turning back to Ginny. "Don't worry, it's nothing to do with you. Just run off and we'll say nothing more about it." The grateful first year nodded dumbly, before turning tail and running. Draco turned back to Pansy.

"Brace yourself, Pan. It looks like revenge might finally be ours."

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Pansy listened in delight as Draco told her what he'd learned.

"So she was actually first on the scene when Mrs. Norris got attacked!" she breathed. "Not just hanging around with Potter and his friends! Well now, isn't that interesting? And a Parselmouth too? Oh Draco, this is too, too perfect! She's fallen right into our hands! Especially being on the scene at the most recent attack!" Pansy could barely contain herself. "We've got her! We've got her!"

"Not quite." Crabbe pointed out. "There's two other attacks not yet accounted for. And she's got alibis for them. She was with Stormosi in the common room when they got that Gryffindor kid. And when that Hufflepuff caught it, she was in lessons, with Snape no less."

Goyle's face fell. "Does that mean we've not got her after all?" he asked plaintively.

"Not necessarily." Pansy was still alive with a terrifying malice. "Her arm burned in that Potions class, and it was nothing to do with a spilled potion. And this I saw with my own eyes - it burned the other time too. Stormosi saw it and tried to get her to go to the hospital wing. But she refused to go and insisted nothing was wrong. Almost as if she wanted no one to know. Almost as if she was guilty."

"A burning arm..." Draco whispered, something his father had once told him coming back to him. "Of course!" He snapped his fingers. "The Heirs bear Marks - the Dark Lord had one too. That must be it - she must have one on her arm and it burns when

there's an attack. No wonder she wants no one to see it. Anyone who didn't know better might mistake it for a Dark Mark."

Crabbe began to smile at this. "Most don't, do they?"

"Of course not," said Pansy softly. "I think Draco's ancestors have seen to that."

"We have indeed." smiled Draco. "The title Heir of Slytherin is associated so deeply with darkness that no one will want to be associated with one who bears it, or believe that they could be a force for good. First thing anyone'll think when they see a serpent symbol on her arm is that she's the Dark Lord's daughter."

"But if she wasn't at two of the attacks..." frowned Goyle.

"Oh Goyle, that's hardly relevant!" cried Pansy. "The Mark burned, that's all the evidence we need! After all, the Heir doesn't do the killing herself, does she? Everyone knows there's a monster in the Chamber. She could have been using the Mark remotely to summon the beast and sent it off to do her bidding on its own. That way, she'd be sure to have an alibi, and not risk being caught. It's the Slytherin thing to do!"

Draco nodded. "It is indeed. Well, folks. Looks like we have all the evidence we need to make a go of it. What do you say?"

"Do it!" Pansy and Crabbe both yelled.

"Go for it, boss!" grinned Goyle. "Write to your dad tonight. We can have her out of here by next week."

And from this moment on, the doom Luella had feared, and which had been circling round her for so long, finally began to close in.

It didn't take long at all. Lucius Malfoy wrote back virtually straight away, assuring his son that he'd take good care of things. He was as good as his word. Just over a week later, Luella found herself summoned out of History of Magic by no less a person than Dumbledore himself.

"Headmaster?" she asked, curious and more than a little worried. Both Deanna and Marlie had looked concerned, and Rianne had suddenly sat bolt upright in what, if Luella hadn't known her far better than that, looked awfully like terror. She tried to dispel the image of Rianne's pale, frightened face.

"Hello, Miss Martin." Dumbledore wasn't smiling. "There are some people here who wish to see you."

"Who?" asked Luella, puzzled. It wasn't likely to be her parents and Caitlin wasn't one for dropping in unannounced.

"I'll tell you later." came the enigmatic reply. "Follow me."

He led her through the school, along the labyrinthine corridors of Hogwarts until they arrived at Professor Snape's classroom. It was empty. Luella supposed he must have a free period. Telling her to wait there, Dumbledore knocked on Snape's door and went in.

She heard the Headmaster speaking to Snape in a low, hurried voice, followed by Snape shouting "What?! Impossible! Headmaster, they can't do that, surely!"

"They can and they quite probably will, with Malfoy leading them. Severus, I need your help if we're to stop this."

"Too right we're going to stop this. Damned if I'm letting Lucius Malfoy rob me of my star student." The door burst open again and Snape strode out, Dumbledore close behind. The Potions master stopped in front of Luella and looked deep into her eyes, an unfathomable look on his face. He placed a hand on Luella's shoulder.

"Luella, I promise you, no harm will come to you. I'll do all in my power to protect you. No matter what happens, you'll always have my support. Remember that." He turned back to Dumbledore, leaving Luella more afraid than she had been before he'd spoken to her. "Come on then. Let's get this over with."

Dumbledore nodded once and led them both out.

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The three of them proceeded in silence. Snape's expression was colder and more hostile than she'd ever seen it, staring impassively into space, as if he were about to go into battle. What for, Luella didn't dare ask. She was afraid it might be on her behalf. Am I really in danger, she asked herself. But that was ridiculous, both Snape and Dumbledore were here, they'd look after her, surely. And yet, she'd not seen either of them look so tense since the night they'd performed Dream Weaver.

Finally, they arrived at Dumbledore's office. The headmaster opened the door and motioned for them both to go in.

There were two other men in the room. One was an older man in an ill-fitting Muggle suit that Luella hadn't seen before. However, the blond younger man in expensive and perfectly tailored robes who was smiling maliciously at her was someone she had no trouble recognising. Lucius Malfoy.

The older man spoke first. "Is this the one, Albus?"

"This is Luella Martin, Minister." said Dumbledore, somehow managing to sound deferential and standoffish at the same time.

"I see. Pray sit down, Miss Martin." He indicated for her to take a seat. Luella did so, wondering what on earth was going on, not liking the way Lucius Malfoy was looking at her one bit. She realised that the other man must be the Minister of Magic,

Cornelius Fudge. What he was doing here was anyone's guess, but she didn't like the way this was going.

"Would someone mind telling me what this is all about?" Snape's menacing tones came from behind her as he took up a position to her right, hovering protectively over her. "And might I add that Miss Martin happens to be a hitherto exemplary student of mine."

"No doubt." sneered Lucius. "But is it just Potions you've been teaching her, Severus?"

Fudge coughed. "Professors, it has come to my attention that Miss Martin here has been practising the Dark Arts."

"What?" gasped Luella, too stunned to keep quiet. She felt Snape's hand gripping her shoulder.

"It's not true." he snarled.

"We'll be the judge of that." said Fudge stiffly. "I have been informed that she's the one behind the recent attacks on Muggle-born students at this school."

"Miss Martin is herself Muggle-born." Dumbledore reminded him.

"Maybe." sniffed Fudge. "But that doesn't mean she's innocent."

"My wife studied Magical History at Invisible College." Lucius said, a small insidious smile announcing the imminent arrival of a secret weapon. "Her dissertation was on the semi-legendary Redeemer Prophecy. That one thousand years after the Fall of Slytherin shall come two Heirs of Slytherin, of Muggle extraction, who will finish what Salazar tried and failed to do. The first will be defeated, but the second, female, one will finish the job. Isn't that right, Miss Martin?"

"But that's not how the prophecy goes..." she began, before clapping her hand to her mouth in horror. Too late she realised she'd walked right into Lucius's trap. Lucius smiled in triumph, turning to Fudge.

"You see, Minister? She knows far more about the prophecy than any mere fourteen year old Muggle child should. And where did she get this knowledge from, I'd like to know?"

Fudge flipped open a file which Luella noticed had her name on it. "Detention, September 1989, for gaining illicit access to the Restricted Section. The only blot on an otherwise perfect record. So you found something there about the legend and realised you were the Second Heir. Is that not correct?"

"No!" cried Luella. "I'd never practice the Dark Arts!"

Fudge ignored her. "I also note you're quite friendly with Caitlin Tyler. Must be rather convenient living next to an Auror, all those esoteric manuals lying around. You must have learnt quite a bit."

"I'm not allowed anywhere near them!" Luella protested.

"She's got a point." came Lucius's sibilant tones. "You don't need books when you have an inborn talent, after all. Is she not a Parselmouth?"

Luella froze. How could he possibly know that? No one did. No one who'd be likely to tell Lucius Malfoy anyway.

Lucius raised his wand. "*Serpensortia!*" A jet black snake shot out of his wand and landed on the desk in front of her. Hissing at her, it reared up and began swaying, clearly not happy.

"And now, Miss Martin, we shall see just how reliable our informant is." Lucius gloated. He let loose another hex that struck the snake, causing it to hiss in pain and fly straight at her.

"No, don't hurt me!" Luella shrieked at it as its fangs hurtled towards her neck. Sure enough, the snake stopped hissing, closed its mouth and curled up, landing on her chest before slithering into her lap, now docile. Luella sagged with relief, stroking it gently. That was a close one. Until she looked up and saw the look of horror on Fudge's face and the grin of triumph on Lucius Malfoy's, and realised what she'd done. Trap number two had just swallowed her whole. Behind her, she heard Snape whispering "Luella, you fool!" in despair. She'd gone and used Parseltongue.

"There you have it, Minister." said Lucius, making the snake disappear with a flick of his wand. "A proven Parselmouth. Convinced yet that she's no ordinary child?"

Fudge nodded. "Yes. Yes, I am." he whispered. He seemed to regain his wits. "You had one other piece of evidence, Lucius."

Lucius nodded. "Oh yes. The coup de grace, as it were. My informant tells me that there is something the matter with her right arm. It appears to cause her pain every time an attack occurs. Is that not right, Severus?"

"Leave her alone, Lucius, you've done enough." snarled Snape through gritted teeth.

"I don't think so, Severus." Lucius smiled. "If you would be so good as to roll up your sleeve, Miss Martin."

Luella looked at Snape, terrified beyond measure now. Snape squeezed her shoulder as a gesture of reassurance, before answering for her.

"No. No, I'm not going to let you do this, Lucius." he said, daring the other man to challenge him.

Lucius just laughed. "Severus, someone with your history should no better than to go around protecting Dark Mages. Someone might think you're up to your old habits again. Now stand aside, man."

Snape stood back, too stunned at the audacity of Lucius Malfoy of all people bringing up the old Death Eater accusations to prevent what happened next. Lucius raised his wand again to let loose another hex. In a moment the sleeve of Luella's robe had torn in two, falling apart to reveal her Mark. Luella desperately tried to hold it together, but Lucius was too quick for her. Striding over to her side, he snatched her hands away, holding the torn fabric back so that no one could miss the conjoined serpents emblazoned there.

"See there, Minister." said Lucius calmly. "The final proof. The ancient symbol of Salazar Slytherin's child and protégée, Morgan of the Tal-y-Rhys. The Parselmouth and Dark Seeress who famously hurled her revenge at the other Founders that Slytherin would rise again and then no one would be able to withstand them. The ancestress of the notorious Tal-y-Rhys dark witches."

"They're not dark witches!" Luella yelled, struggling in Lucius's grasp.

"Shut up, girl." Lucius told her. "The entire bloodline was notorious for abduction, vampirism, infanticide, succubism and incubism, bewitchment and other arts of that nature. And this was one of their symbols. A Mark of absolute evil, indicating their ability to go underground and rejuvenate even in the most adverse of circumstances."

"Liar." said Severus softly. Lucius stopped and looked up.

"What did you say?" he asked, eyes glittering murderously.

"You heard." came the reply. "It's not evil and we both know it. It's an ancient symbol of healing and rebirth, one of the most ancient and powerful. Evil can't touch it. All your lies won't change that."

Lucius drew his breath sharply, his eyes incandescent with rage. He let Luella go, and for a moment, she thought he was going to hit him. But he controlled himself.

"An ex-Death Eater would say that, wouldn't he?" Lucius hissed. He turned back to Fudge. "Minister, are you convinced of her guilt?"

Fudge nodded. "Do it, Lucius." he said hoarsely. He produced a document from his clothes, signed it, and passed it to Lucius. "I authorise you to use the mandate the other governors gave you. Do it now."

Lucius smiled in triumph as he began to read. "We, the governors of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, subject to investigation by our designated representative Lucius Malfoy, do hereby pronounce ourselves satisfied that the student Luella Angelica Martin is guilty of using Dark Arts against her fellow students."

"She is not!" raged Snape. "I tell you, she's innocent!"

Lucius ignored him and continued.

"By the power vested in us as governors, we hereby banish and expel her from Hogwarts School and the magical community, and do expressly forbid her to practice any form of the Arts Magick again for as long as she shall live, effective immediately."

"No. Oh no." Luella whispered, shaking all over. This wasn't happening, couldn't be happening. They couldn't send her away, couldn't send her back to being just an ordinary Muggle, they couldn't!

"You can't do this, Malfoy!" snarled Snape. "She's innocent!"

"Too late, Severus." smiled Lucius sanctimoniously. "I just did."

Snape turned to Dumbledore in anguish. "Albus, do something. Please!"

Dumbledore shook his head in sorrow. "Severus, there's nothing I can do. I can't overrule an official mandate from the governors that the Minister himself has authorised."

Lucius turned back to Snape with a smirk. "And now, if I can be allowed to get on with my job please? *Accio* wand!" Luella's wand flew out from her sleeve and into Lucius's outstretched hand.

"No. Please, no. Don't, please, I beg you." Luella choked. "Not my wand, please no!"

"Should have thought of that before you started stalking your fellow students, shouldn't you?" said Fudge harshly. "Be grateful you're not going to Azkaban. Lucius, do it."

Lucius just smiled indolently as with one flick of his wrists, he snapped Luella's wand in two with an awful crack that echoed around the room. A shower of green sparks shot out of the break, before the wand finally died, becoming nothing more than shards of hazel with limp dragon heartstrings dangling from them.

A terrible silence descended over the room, punctuated only by Luella's sobs as she watched her power and status as a witch dying before her eyes. Lucius threw the ruins of her wand at her with a sneer before turning to leave.

"I think we're done here. Shall we go, Minister?"

Fudge nodded, getting to his feet. "I think we should. There's nothing more to be done here. Good day gentlemen." He inclined his head as he followed Lucius out.

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Chapter Twenty One And Then There Were Three

Luella followed Snape through the school in silence. He'd mended the torn sleeve on her robe, not that it mattered now. It wasn't like she'd ever wear it again, after all. Snape hadn't said anything to her since they'd left Dumbledore's office. She didn't dare ask what he thought of her now. And yet he'd stood up to Malfoy. He'd tried to defend her. He must know she'd been set up. That alone gave her hope. He'd help her out, try and get her reinstated or at least help her get settled in the Muggle world again. Wouldn't he?

They arrived in the Slytherin corridor. Luella made to go back to her dorm and start packing, but a simple touch on her shoulder stopped her. She turned round and saw Snape looking at her, anguish in his eyes and sorrow all over his face.

"Wait, Luella. There's no need to rush this. I'm not so heartless as to fling you on the next train home. Come." He indicated for her to follow him inside.

She closed the office door behind her and hesitated. Snape lifted his wand, lit the fire and turned to look at her with that same agonised gaze. For a few moments, they said nothing, just watching the other, before Snape stepped forward, covered the distance between them and swept her into his arms, stroking her hair in a surprisingly tender gesture. Returning the embrace, Luella buried her head in his robes and let the tears she'd been holding back flow freely.

"Don't, child." she heard him whisper, pained, desperate and never before so powerless. "It'll be alright, I promise. I'll get your name cleared, I'll get you back in this school somehow, I swear it Luella. I promise you."

"You couldn't stop them kicking me out." she whispered back. He drew her all the more close.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Child, I... I let you down, I should have protected you, I'm sorry."

"Not your fault." Luella whispered. "I used Parseltongue, didn't I? Walked straight into Malfoy's trap not once but twice. Why on earth didn't I see what was coming? Try and outsmart him."

"No fault but ours." Snape replied harshly. "We should have told you what was happening before we took you in there, devised some kind of strategy. But no. We kept on treating you like some kind of child who couldn't fight her own battles, and what happened? Lucius ran rings around us all and you were the one to suffer. Will you ever forgive me?" He let her go and gazed unhappily into her eyes.

"You did your best." Luella reassured him. "Malfoy and Mr. Fudge, you saw them. They were determined to see me out of here. Don't blame yourself."

"No." Snape straightened up. "No, you're right. We can't just sit here and wallow in misery. Come on, come and sit down." He indicated the chair before his desk. Luella slumped gratefully into it and watched as once more, he unlocked the drinks cabinet

and produced a bottle of brandy. However, this time he produced not one tumbler, but two. He poured one for himself, before turning to her.

"I don't normally make a habit of hitting the bottle, despite what you may think, but at times like this, it can be of great comfort. Would you like to try some? Just a small measure for medicinal purposes, you understand. You have enough on your plate as it is, the last thing I want to do is add to them by sending you home drunk."

"Shame." murmured Luella, suddenly wondering what drunkenness was like and if it really was a panacea for all ills. "Go on then, just a bit."

Snape poured her a small measure, a wry smile on his face as he passed the glass over to her. Luella lifted it to her lips and knocked it back.

And promptly began choking and spluttering, trying to get the bitter aftertaste out of her mouth and stop the feeling that her throat was on fire.

"Water!" she gasped, pushing what remained of the brandy as far away from her as possible. Snape just smiled, trying to suppress a laugh, and topped up another glass from a small water fountain in one corner. Luella took it from him gratefully and downed it. It didn't get rid of the taste entirely, but at least it got rid of the burning.

"Jesus." she whispered, shaking her head, before staring at a still grinning Snape in amazement. "You seriously drink that stuff for fun?"

"Oh yes." Snape nodded. "I like the kick. Gives me a nice, warm feeling inside." He shrugged. "Well, something has to. Not to your taste I take it."

"No." Luella shuddered. "God almighty, things would have to be pretty bad before I started knocking that stuff back."

"Good." Snape removed her glass of brandy and put the bottle away. "That was my intention. Another case of underage drinking and alcoholism prevented. One good thing accomplished today. Now to business." He sat up, brisk and efficient suddenly. "We need to work out a short term strategy to help you readjust. Hopefully that's all we'll need - I'm hoping we can get you back into Hogwarts before the year ends. But in the mean time, we'll need to make arrangements."

"My parents are going to kill me." Luella whispered, the horrible reality of it all sinking in.

"Not if they don't know about it." Snape replied, opening a drawer in his desk and producing what looked like Floo powder. Tossing a handful into the fire, he called out "Mel Lovegood, DDAE. Secure line, password Eleanor Rigby." Seeing Luella's raised eyebrow, Snape just shrugged. "Mel likes that record."

The flames flared green, and a head emerged in the fire. But it wasn't Melissa Lovegood. It was Caitlin.

"Severus?" Caitlin blinked. "Is something wrong?"

"Caitlin?" Snape stared at her. "What are you doing there?"

"I work here." came the crisp reply. "Mel has the day off so all her calls are being rerouted to me. What do you want, Severus?"

"Want? Oh, er, ah... Erm, Caitlin, I need your help." Snape stammered.

"Figures." sighed Caitlin. "What is it this time?"

"There's an owl on its way from Hogwarts to Luella's house. I need you to intercept it and make sure it doesn't reach its destination. Take the letter it brings and destroy it before the Martins see it. If either one of them does chance to read it, then use Memory Charms to make them forget they ever saw it. Could you do that for me? Please?"

Caitlin was looking at him extremely suspiciously. "Why?"

"It's very important. Something's happened, and I don't want Luella's parents to know about it."

Caitlin's eyes widened. "Something's happened? Severus, you don't mean... I mean, she's not been..." Her bottom lip began to tremble as an emotion Luella had hardly ever before seen on Caitlin's face began to make itself shown - that of fear. "She's not been attacked, has she?"

Snape shook his head. "No. No, she's fine. Have no worries on that score."

Caitlin sighed with relief. "Thank the gods. But if it's not that... Severus, what *has* happened?"

"Lucius Malfoy happened." said Snape coldly. "Somehow, don't ask me how, he found out she's the Second Heir and twisted the evidence to make it look like Luella was causing the attacks. The governors have just expelled her."

"What?!" gasped Caitlin. "But... they can't! She's done nothing wrong!"

"You know that, I know that. But the governors chose to believe Malfoy's word over that of Dumbledore and myself, and out she goes."

"Oh my god..." Caitlin whispered, clearly horrified. "Is she alright?"

"All things considered, she could have taken it a lot worse, but I wouldn't say she was happy with the situation."

"Oh my... Is she there? Can I talk to her?" Caitlin asked, visibly shaking. Snape nodded and beckoned Luella over. Luella got up and walked over to the fire, kneeling in front of Caitlin's worried face, unsure what to do.

"Hello?" she began, hesitantly.

"Hi, Luella." said Caitlin, trying to smile. "Sweetheart, are you alright?"

Luella opened her mouth to say yes, of course she was, but no sound came out. Because it wasn't true, was it? She felt as far from alright as it was possible to be. Instead, she just shook her head and burst into tears.

"What am I going to do, Caitlin?" she sobbed. "I can't go back to being a Muggle, I just can't! I'm not one of them, I don't feel myself around them, I'm no good at pretending to be one of them, and I hated Muggle school! I can't go back to one, I just can't!"

"Of course you won't, darling." Caitlin soothed her. "A witch you are, and a witch you'll stay. We'll think of something to tell your parents, don't worry. And in the meantime, you're going to come and live with me, until the summer holidays. I'll intercept that owl, I'll pick you up at King's Cross, they need never know you're not at school. And if you're not cleared by the summer, well then we'll just find you another school to go to."

"You will?" Luella dried her eyes. "But... there aren't any others in the country, are there?"

"Not this country." smiled Caitlin. "But there's plenty abroad. In fact there's one in America called New Hogwarts, a lot like this one with the same houses and everything. If we can't get you back into the real Hogwarts, then we'll find you a place in the next best thing."

"Really?" Luella's eyes widened. "But... will they want someone who was expelled from their old school for practising the Dark Arts?"

Snape coughed delicately. "Seeing as your school report and references from your House Master and Headmaster aren't going to mention anything of the sort, I can't see that'll be a problem."

"They're not?" Luella asked in surprise. She began to smile as it dawned on her that this wasn't going to be quite the disaster she'd feared. "You... you'd both be willing to lie for me like that?"

Snape and Caitlin nodded. "Of course we would!" Caitlin declared.

"It's the least we could do." shrugged Snape.

"But..." said Luella, still suffering a few residual doubts, "Isn't this unethical?"

"What, and getting you expelled for something you didn't do isn't?" asked Caitlin, her words tinged with anger.

"Well, when you put it like that..." said Luella, her doubts beginning to dissolve. "Alright! Let's do it!" She turned from one to the other, unable to stop smiling. "Thank you. Both of you. I don't know what I'd do without you, you know? You've both done so much for me. Thank you!" She gave Snape an impulsive hug. After

blinking in amazement at someone wanting to spontaneously hug him, he smiled and returned it. It wasn't often he got hugged for the sake of it and he wanted to make the most of it, although that grin of Caitlin's was putting him off a bit.

"Someone's popular, aren't they, Sevi?" she chuckled.

"Stop it." he muttered, suddenly feeling uncharacteristically embarrassed. He let Luella go. She sat up and turned back to Caitlin.

"I'd hug you too, but I'm not sure I can via the Floo." Luella told her.

"Not to worry, dear." Caitlin smiled. "I'll be seeing you soon enough anyway." She turned back to Snape. "Well, I'd better get straight on to this. I'll have to owl Mel, sort out a Ministry car for the day, get Carmela to hold the fort here, then get straight on to intercept duty. I suppose I shall see you at some point?"

"I'll see if I can drop in tonight, or tomorrow." Snape promised. "Thanks Caitlin." "No problem." Caitlin replied, her face fading away and vanishing, leaving the two of them alone. Snape breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well. That went rather better than I'd thought, didn't it?"

Luella guessed that he wasn't just talking about making arrangements for her welfare. "Look, you don't have to visit us or anything. I mean, I'll understand if you'd rather not see us. I won't be upset or angry or anything."

"Nonsense, Luella." Snape patted her shoulder. "I'm coming to see you, and that is final. Besides, if I don't visit you, how are you going to manage to continue your education?"

Luella's face fell. "What? You mean I'm still going to have to do work?"

"Yes, you are. Don't look at me like that. If you're going to get reinstated or sent to another school, you'll need to make sure you don't fall behind with your studies." Snape looked at her with his stern, pushy teacher look. "I don't want to have to go to all the trouble of getting you into New Hogwarts only to find you have no idea what you're meant to be studying, after all."

"No sir." said Luella quietly, still a little disappointed that she wasn't about to get four months extra holiday out of things.

"Excellent." Snape's face softened. "Now all that remains is to break the news to your friends. Deanna's not going to take this very well, is she?"

Luella shook her head. "She's going hit the roof. I'd put Draco under armed guard if I were you. Not to mention whoever told him I was the Second Heir. How did he know about the Mark, Professor?"

Snape shook his head. "I don't know, Luella. However, given Deanna's natural cunning, I don't think I shall have long to wait before we find out."

Luella chuckled. "No, I don't suppose we shall. I almost feel sorry for whoever it was." She caught the look Snape was giving her. "Only a little, mind."

"Much better. I know you're capable of feeling compassion for the most unworthy of wretches," here a very thoughtful look, "but even so, there's limits." He got to his feet. "Lessons will be ending as we speak. I'll call her in so you can say your goodbyes in private, break the news to her yourself." He walked over to one of his cupboards to reveal a round object covered in a black velvet cloth, which he snatched away to reveal a small crystal ball. He tapped it with his wand and muttered a few words, causing it to turn green and start glowing. Leaning forward, he spoke into it.

"Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office, please. Your presence is required here immediately. That's Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office." Stepping away, he tapped the ball again, causing it to go dark again and covered it, before closing the doors and returning to Luella.

"It's the school intercom." Snape explained, seeing Luella's puzzled expression. "For urgent announcements and contacting those not within reach of a Floo connection. Deanna'll be here any minute."

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"Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office." Snape's voice echoed around the corridors. "Your presence is required here immediately. That's Deanna Tyler to Professor Snape's office."

"What've you done now, Tyler?" Lucas called from behind her. History of Magic had now finished and all the Slytherins were making their way back to the Nest.

"Nothing!" protested Deanna. "I've been behaving myself. Honestly."

"A likely story." Lucas scoffed. Next to him, Alex Lynch shook his head.

"First Lu gets dragged off by Dumbledore, now you're up in front of Snape. What have you two been up to?"

"Nothing!" snapped Deanna. "It's Marlie I team up with when I want to do something unorthodox!"

"Tyler!" Marlie hissed. "Keep your voice down!"

"Sorry Marls. But seriously, why on earth does Snape want to see me? I've done nothing wrong." Deanna said, confused.

Marlie fingered her necklace. "I don't know. But when Snape asks to see you, it's not normally a good sign. What do you think, Ri? Ri?"

Rianne didn't answer. Ever since Luella had been taken from their class, she'd been staring into space as if worried about something. And now, she look positively terrified.

"Ri?" Marlie asked, starting to feel rather anxious herself. Her necklace had been giving off warning signals all morning, and now it was positively screaming trouble at her. And the sight of normally self-composed, completely unflappable Rianne Stormosi trembling and shaking like a frightened child was not helping. "Ri, what is it?"

"Yeah, Ri, you look like you've seen a ghost." said Deanna, also picking up on Rianne's fears. "What's up?"

"Lu." whispered Rianne. "It's Lu. She's in trouble." She turned to Deanna, wild-eyed.
"Tyler, go and find her! Go now!"

"What?" gasped Deanna. "Ri, what are you talking about, Lu's done nothing wrong, and besides I have to go and see Snape..."

"WELL GO AND SEE HIM THEN!" Rianne screamed at her. "Because Lu's in trouble, they're going to do something terrible to her if they haven't already! That's why Dumbledore took her out of class, that's why Snape wants to see you now. So don't just stand there, get a move on!"

Deanna looked dumbfounded. "But Ri, how on earth could you possibly know...?"

"DEANNA, GO!" Rianne shouted, by now on the verge of hysteria. "GET MOVING! NOW!"

"Alright, alright." said Deanna, shaken by Rianne's loss of control. "I'm going!" Turning around, she began to run towards the dungeons.

Marlie watched her go, stunned. She turned to Rianne, who had buried her head in her hands, still shaking.

"Ri, what's going on?" Marlie whispered. "What is it? Is Lu OK? Talk to me, Ri!"

Rianne just shook her head. "I don't know." she said, her voice empty, all emotion spent screaming at Deanna. "I hope I'm wrong, that I'm off-base this time, that it didn't happen, isn't going to happen, that this is just my imagination. But I'm scared, I'm just so scared..." She let her hands fall to her sides.

Marlie took her by the arm, troubled but determined not to show it. Last thing they needed was for all four of them to lose it. "Come on. We're going back to the dorm. You need a rest and some water, and a bit of privacy. And when DT's finished with Snape and Lu turns up, we'll get to the bottom of this. Come on. Let's get you home."

Rianne silently assented as Marlie led her away.

Deanna arrived at Snape's office with not a little trepidation. After all, he hardly ever sent for any of his students unless there was a problem. Had it been good news, he'd have stopped her in the corridor or after class for a chat. This, on the other hand, was

more like a summons. Deanna shook herself, but couldn't get rid of the sense of foreboding hanging over her. She still didn't know why Luella had been hauled out of class, or where she was now. And Snape hardly ever used the intercom. That was McGonagall's baby. Snape preferred the personal approach. So much more effective psychologically. Which was why the current situation was setting off alarm bells. Gathering her courage, she knocked on the door and walked in.

She was met with a sight that seemed to confirm her worst fears. Snape wasn't sitting at his desk. Instead, he was in front of the fire, with his arm around a young girl in Slytherin colours who Deanna had no trouble recognising as Luella. Now, even though Snape and Luella were close, they weren't 'curling up together in front of a roaring fire' close, at least she hoped not. That would be just too weird. Besides, Snape would probably want something like that kept well hidden, and given that he'd just asked her to arrive, he either wanted her to see this or just didn't care. Either way, it meant trouble.

Deanna coughed nervously. "Er... you wanted to see me, sir?"

Both of them turned around. Snape smiled to see her there, but his eyes told a different story. Deanna flinched from the pain there and turned to Luella.

And felt her heart stop as she saw that Luella had tears rolling down her face. She tried to smile, but her heart clearly wasn't in it.

"Hello." she whispered, sounding as if she were about to fall apart.

"Lu!" Deanna gasped, striding over to her friend and sliding down next to her in one fluid motion. "What happened?" She ran an uncomprehending finger down Luella's cheek. "Why are you crying?"

Luella shook her head. "Deanna, I..." She stopped talking and flung her arms around her friend, burying her face in Deanna's hair. Deanna, still staring in shock, held her, smoothing her hair mechanically, caught in a bewildered trance. Trying to make sense of it all, she turned to Snape.

"What's going on?" she asked, desperate for answers. "Why's Lu so upset? What's happened?"

Snape shook his head, lowering his eyes in sorrow. "Malfoy." he said quietly. "Lucius Malfoy found out she was the Second Heir."

"What?" gasped Deanna. "How?"

"I don't know." Snape replied, anger beginning to shade the sadness. "But he knew she was a Parselmouth, and he knew about the Mark. And he persuaded the rest of the governors that she was the Heir of Slytherin. They expelled her this morning."

"WHAT??" Deanna screamed. She spun back to face Luella. "Oh gods. Lu, no. Tell me it's not true. Please. It can't be, it just can't!" She stared at her friend in horror, silently pleading for Luella to deny it.

Luella could only shake her head in misery as she lifted her head up to look Deanna in the eye. "I'm sorry, mate. I'm so sorry."

"No." whispered Deanna, the desperation draining away, leaving her looking and sounding like the frightened child she'd once been. "Lu, no. Oh gods. No, they can't send you away. They can't! I need you here, Lu. I need you." She traced a finger down her friend's cheek, unable to believe it. "I need you." she whispered again, before reaching out and pulling Luella into her arms.

Snape coughed delicately as he got to his feet. "I'll let you two have some privacy. I'll be back in a few minutes." He walked swiftly across the room and through the door leading to his private apartments.

Deanna didn't say anything. There was nothing she could say. The one awful thought kept flying around her head - *they've kicked my best mate out. Luella's leaving.*

Luella's tears seemed to subside. "It's weird how things pan out, isn't it?" she whispered. "I always did wonder if it was a fluke, you know. If someone had made a mistake and I wasn't really meant to be here at all. Kept worrying that I might get sent away any minute. It just didn't seem real. Then last year, with Voldemort and the Stone and everything, I finally felt like I'd earned the right to be here." She laughed bitterly. "Looks like I was right the first time, wasn't I? Stupid of me to think I could really get away from the Muggles. Maybe Salazar had the right idea. I'm not worthy to study magic, am I?"

"Stop that!" Deanna told her, inwardly horrified by Luella's words, by the thought that any mage could think their power unfounded. "Lu, of course you're meant to be here! You're a witch, one of the most powerful I know, maybe as good as my mum one day, you have Glamoury for Hera's sake, of course you belong here! Lu, you are Slytherin Redeemer. If you don't belong here, who does?"

"Not a pure-blood though, am I?" said Luella quietly. "It's alright for you, you've never had to wonder, you've always known. You're a Tal-y-Rhys, you can trace your ancestors right back to the Founding and beyond. Two of them started this school. This is your reality, you've never known anything else. I'm just a Muggle-born with a weird tattoo who everyone thinks might be a Tal-y-Rhys Messiah."

"We don't think, we know." said Deanna, with just a hint of annoyance. Cupping Luella's face in her hands she stared deep into the other girl's eyes. "Lu, you're a Parselmouth and a Glamourer. Two rare abilities associated with the Tal-y-Rhys line and you've got not one but two. You are the Second Heir. And Malfoy's conniving won't change that. Listen, I'll tell Mum, get her to pull some strings. She'll have you back here in no time!" Deanna patted her on the shoulder, trying to sound confident.

"She knows." came the less than upbeat response. "She's going to shelter me at your place until the summer, and if I'm not reinstated by then, she's sending me to this place in the States called New Hogwarts."

Deanna's mood shifted instantly, leaving her staring at Luella in what could only be envy. "New Hogwarts! Wow! Lu, that's one of the most prestigious schools in the

Western Hemisphere. Well, apart from the Eldorado Institute at Tiahuanaco, and the Native American one in the Grand Canyon, but you couldn't get into the Grand Canyon one anyway as they only accept Native Americans, and Eldorado's miles away, dealing with Incan magic which is completely different. But anyway, New Hogwarts though! God, I almost wish I was getting expelled now. If you do end up going there, is there any way I could, you know, come along too? To help you settle in, like."

Luella couldn't help smiling. "You'll have to ask Caitlin. But she might let you." She lowered her voice. "Is it really that good?"

Deanna nodded. "Oh yeah. Fantastic Quidditch teams, all of them. Only Stateside school that plays it."

"I can hardly wait." said Luella, voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Very good Potions teacher too." Deanna added.

"As good as Snape?" asked Luella.

Deanna stopped smiling. "Academically, yes. But whether he's as good with Slytherins in trouble, I don't know."

Luella looked at the floor. "It won't be the same, Deanna. It's not this Hogwarts. You won't be there. Or Marls. Or Ri. The Slytherin common room there won't be decked out in psychedelic lights, it won't have a stereo, it won't have you and Marls obsessing over Quidditch, it won't have me and Rianne both rolling our eyes and mocking you behind your backs, there won't be a sweepstake on how many points Gryffindor are going to lose this week, there won't be a Syndicate, there won't be you and Malfoy sniping at each other the whole time. All the little things I love about this place, they won't be there, will they? It won't be the same. God, I'm going to miss this place so much!" She buried herself in Deanna's arms again, sobbing quietly.

"We'll all miss you too." Deanna whispered, the realisation striking her in the heart with a pang of heartache as she realised that Luella really was going, that in a matter of hours, it'd be just three of them in the dorm. That for the rest of the school year, no matter what happened in the future, Luella would not be there. "Gods Lu, I wish you weren't leaving! That bloody family, I swear to Hades I'll get them for this." She pulled Luella to her, a savage gleam in her eyes. "I am going to avenge this, Lu. No one does this to a friend of mine and gets away with it. I'm going to find out who told Malfoy about you and I am going to make them regret they'd ever been born magical. Gods almighty Lu, but they are going to suffer and suffer and suffer until I'm through with them. What I did to Dexter Crabbe is going to look like an act of benevolence and mercy compared to this!"

"Deanna, you don't have to!" Luella whispered, a little shocked at the ferocity in Deanna's eyes although not really very surprised. "I don't want you to get in trouble too."

Deanna just shrugged. "The worst they can do is expel me and if that happens, well at least we'll be together again. And yes I do have to. You don't think they'll be allowed to get away with this, do you? If I can do justice in this at least, then it'll go part way to making things OK."

"Oh Deanna..." sighed Luella, before flinging her arms around her friend. "You're the best mate I've ever had, you know that?"

"You're not so bad yourself." Deanna said, smiling despite herself. For a few moments they did nothing but hold each other, before the door opened again, and Professor Snape re-entered the room.

"It's time." was all he said. Deanna let her friend go, a lump in her throat. This was it. It was over. Really over. She wouldn't see Luella again until Easter after this.

Luella pulled herself to her feet, trembling. "Do I have to?"

"You can't stay here, child." came the reply, gentle despite its firmness. "I've given you all the time I could."

Luella hung her head, resigned to her fate. "Is everyone in lessons yet?"

"Not yet. There's ten more minutes of break left. I thought you might want a chance to say goodbye to Miss Stormosi and Miss Lovegood too."

"Yeah, Rianne's been in an awful state all morning." Deanna added. "Reckoned you were in danger and needed me. She was right too, damn the woman."

"Did she now?" said Snape thoughtfully. "That's interesting. Very interesting. I must start watching her carefully."

"Ooh, bet she'll love that." murmured Deanna, shooting a grin at Luella. The other girl didn't respond.

"I can't do it." whispered Luella. "I can't face it, having to go back to my housemates and tell them what happened. Can't face Malfoy grinning at me and Pansy sneering 'Where's your wand then, Martin?'. I just can't stand the humiliation!"

"Then don't." said Snape simply.

Luella looked up. "What?"

"Don't face it." said Snape calmly. "You may not have a wand, but you still have Glamour. Veil yourself. Walk right past them without any of them seeing. Or walk past like a queen, daring them to challenge you. Whatever makes you feel happier."

Luella finally began to smile. "Yes. Yes I could, couldn't I? Hell, if they already think I'm the evil Heir of Slytherin, the least I could do is act like it." She smoothed out her robes in one assured gesture. "Come on Deanna. Let's go out in style." Shaking her hair, she sashayed out of the room, head held high.

Deanna gave Snape one last grin before following her out. This was going to be interesting.

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Luella took a deep breath as she stood outside the door to the Serpents' Nest. As common room entrances went, it wasn't exactly ornate. Instead of the portraits, tapestries and swivelling bookshelves that marked the other common rooms (Penelope had told her that the Ravenclaw common room opened out into the library - if you stood next to a certain set of shelves tucked away at the back and said the right password, the whole thing would rotate round and fling you into Ravenclawland), Slytherin just had a blank wall. No stone dragons, gargoyles or snakes, no portraits of great manipulators of history. Just stone. Well, what else would you have expected in a dungeon? As Rianne had once said, a life size portrait of Machiavelli in the middle of an otherwise empty underground corridor would be all very well, but it would also announce to even the least aware Hufflepuff that something was up. Why not just have a big neon sign saying "Slytherin Common Room This Way!" and have done, and no Marlie that wasn't a suggestion for decorating it.

Luella couldn't help smiling. Happy days. Still hard to believe that she'd never witness any of it again. But no. She couldn't afford to think about that now. She needed Glamoury to work for her, and unless your mind was focused and calm, Glamoury didn't work that effectively. While it could make people believe anything you wanted, it did require that you yourself believe in it too. Calm, she told herself. Be calm and relaxed. You're the Heir of Slytherin, Child of the Tal-y-Rhys, Chosen One of Morgan. Act like it.

Luella reached out for a certain brick that was marked with an almost invisible carving of a snake curled round a tree. You didn't have to open the door this way, just speaking the password was usually enough, and most Slytherins could never be bothered using the long version. But there were times when nothing less than the full Tolkien-esque splendour would do. She rubbed the carving three times widdershins and watched as it began to glow, tendrils of gleaming silvery light winding out from the centre, gradually weaving themselves into a magnificent picture of a giant archway, with an apple tree in the middle with a snake wrapped around its trunk. A scene that never failed to impress Luella, although she couldn't help feeling that it looked a little asymmetrical, as if something were missing. She couldn't think what it was though, and she had no time for wondering now. Drawing herself up to her full height, she cast a Glamour around herself and spoke the password.

"*Fear is the mind-killer.*" Very appropriate. Mike Lovegood's choice, that one - despite technophobic leanings, he did like Muggle science fiction. Certainly it was better than some previous efforts, such as the one they'd had over the holidays, *pure-blood*. Although the usual method of choosing a Slytherin password, holding a lottery of everyone in the house and giving the winner the opportunity to pick that week's password, was all very democratic, it did lead to some rather unpleasant choices on occasion. You could always tell when it had been Malfoy's turn.

Luella brushed that thought out of her mind too. Another thing to miss, another thing to be ruthlessly airbrushed away lest it interfere with her thinking and gods forbid lead

to a public show of pain. As the stone before her shimmered and faded away, leaving the silver archway now surrounding a yawning gap in the wall, she gathered her courage and went in.

Silence fell as one by one, the denizens of Slytherin looked up and noticed her. So far, so good. Some of the younger Slytherins were backing away nervously, and all were staring as if they'd never seen her before. Excellent work. Luella nodded, satisfied so far before seeking out Rianne and Marlie. Nowhere in sight, either of them. Well, Deanna had said Rianne had been upset all morning. Probably in the dorm then. Which just left the architect of her demise.

He was there, sitting pretty with the usual crowd. Crabbe and Goyle, both smirking, both with triumphalism crowning them like a wreath. Pansy, sneering as usual. And Malfoy himself in the midst of it all, lolling on a beanbag, arrogance incarnate, grinning with an insolence Luella could only dream of slapping out of him. However, eye contact soon changed that. Pansy's sneer faded, Goyle immediately edged behind Malfoy and started looking guiltily away, a definite note of uncertainty crept in behind Crabbe's arrogant front, and Malfoy himself was looking distinctly less jubilant than he had been.

She ignored the others. No sense dealing with lackeys - the king himself was what she wanted. She walked straight over to Malfoy, aware of every other eye in the room on her, and stood over him, eyes not leaving his for a moment.

"So you've had your victory." she heard herself saying. "You've had your revenge. Three years ago in this very room I saw your sibs expelled, and now the wheel's come full circle and it's my turn. But I'll tell you this, when they came to us afterwards and threatened us, they didn't frighten us. Because we knew we were in the right, and we knew we could deal with any revenge they planned. Deanna laughed in Dexter Crabbe's face and told him he should have taken his own advice to trust no one. And afterwards, we sat back and celebrated. What will you be doing?" She upped the Glamoury and forced her features into a sneer not unlike Malfoy's own. "I'll tell you. You'll be staring into the fire, wondering if you did the right thing, knowing your actions were unjust, fearing retaliation and living in constant fear of when that sword of Damocles will fall. You may have won the battle, but you've already lost the war. I might be gone now, but I'll live on in your minds, and there'll be no peace for you. Because you have done the unforgivable - you've attacked someone stronger than you are. I'll be back, Malfoy. To finish my mission. To rid the school of all those unworthy to study magic. And you, Draco Malfoy, will be the first to go." She stepped back, surveying the results. Surveying Draco Malfoy's shaken face, Pansy reduced to a little girl cowering behind her friends, Crabbe and Goyle frozen like statues and just as capable of protecting their master. If she had to go, then at least she'd made sure a little piece of herself would be around to haunt those who'd forced her out.

A quiet cough from behind her pierced the silence. Luella turned round. Deanna was standing there, watching her, with a small, secretive smile on her face. Without a word, she extended her hand and touched Luella's shoulder, leading her away. She understood at once. Time to go, to leave them for others to avenge. Time to leave

Slytherin behind and go now to her last farewells. Ignoring the stares and whispers now breaking out behind her back, she allowed Deanna to lead her to the dorm.

Rianne and Marlie leapt to their feet as the door opened. The first thing that Luella registered was Rianne racing over to her and leaning down to take her face in her hands.

"Are you OK?" the other girl whispered. "Are you safe? Not hurt?"

Luella didn't even know where to start with that. She wasn't exactly in danger, but she wasn't OK either. And Rianne looked as if the slightest piece of bad news would tear her apart.

"I... I don't know." she said, truthfully enough.

"Your wand, Lu." said Rianne in desperation. "Where is your wand? Show me your wand!"

Luella bit her lip. Rianne did know. Unable to answer, she just hung her head in shame. Rianne let her go, turning away with a horrible choking sob.

"Oh gods." was all she could say. "It happened, didn't it? It really happened. Gods!" She collapsed on the bed, oblivious to the concerned looks of her friends.

"What happened?" asked Marlie, turning frantically from Luella to Rianne in turn.
"Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

"Malfoy." whispered Rianne. "He broke your wand, didn't he?"

Luella nodded. Too painful to admit it, too shameful to say those two little words "I'm expelled."

"Broke your wand?" said Marlie, now even more bewildered. "Why? I wouldn't stand for that if I were you, Lu. Get his father to pay for a new one then hex him to death with it."

"Not Draco!" hissed Rianne, raising her eyes to Marlie's, causing the other girl to flinch away. "Lucius." She waited, letting the implications sink in.

"But why would Lucius Malfoy break Lu's wand - oh!" Marlie's hands flew to her face as it dawned on her what the only occasions were for the formal breaking of a mage's wand. Their funeral... or their banishment. "Oh my god. Oh, Lu. Lu, no way! But why, I mean, how, I mean, you've done nothing wrong..."

"That wasn't what you were thinking last November." said Deanna quietly. "You were thinking just the reverse back then, and now it seems someone else has drawn the same conclusion. They expelled her this morning."

A low moan escaped Rianne's lips as she huddled on the bed. "No." she began to weep. "Oh gods, no. No, no, NO!" She got to her feet and began pacing the floor. "Damn it, damn it, damn it, why am I cursed like this, why didn't I see it earlier, why did it have to come so late, why couldn't it have come early enough to let me warn you, WHY?" She screamed the last word, her usual calm shattering. Turning to Luella, she strode forward and drew her friend into a hug, tears rolling down her cheek. "I knew it, Lu. I saw it happen. Saw you sitting in Dumbledore's office, with Malfoy across from you with this horrible gloating grin on his face with your wand in his hands, and he - he... snapped it in two..." The words dissolved into tears as she buried her face in Luella's hair.

Deanna and Marlie both frowned, looking at each other in confusion.

"Saw it?" Marlie asked. "But Ri, you were with us all along, how on earth...?"

Deanna however was beginning to realise just why Rianne had reacted in the way she had.

"Exactly, you were with us, so the only way you could have seen..." here she paused, as the reality finally sunk in. "Ri, you've got the Sight!"

"Much good it's ever done me." laughed Rianne coldly as she let Luella go. "I spent most of my childhood using it to fund my father's gambling habit, and most of my teens frustrated that it never warned me of anything I really needed to know. It never told me my mother was still alive, it never told me about your father, Deanna, and it never bloody told me about Lu until it was far too late to warn her or do anything." She sank onto her bed once more, weary to the bone and utterly exhausted. "I saw it as soon as Dumbledore led her out. I had to spend the entire morning knowing what was going to happen, hoping beyond hope I was wrong, and knowing that there was nothing, absolutely nothing I could do!" She wiped a tear away. "Lu, I'm so sorry, can you ever forgive me?"

"Ri, you've nothing to be sorry for." Luella told her as she joined her. "It wasn't your fault." She folded her arms around Rianne as something else occurred to her. "So that's why you can see through Glamoury. Caitlin told me about it before, that it works in opposition to Glamoury, it deals in truth and won't be fooled by a Glamourer's illusions. But it also can't be commanded like Glamoury, because truth is beyond manipulation." A bitter laugh. "Yeah, Caitlin? Try telling Lucius Malfoy that."

"Draco is going to pay for this." said Marlie, indignant. "He is going to pay!" She twirled round to face Deanna. "And whoever helped him! They're all going to pay when I get my hands on them!"

"Later." said Deanna softly. "Later. They'll keep. Lu won't." She checked her watch. "Lu, you'd better start packing before Snape turns up wanting to know where you are."

Luella let go of Rianne, nodding mutely. Moving slowly, trying to put off the inevitable moment, she began to put her things into her trunk. As she did so, Marlie

stepped forward and began to help her, followed by Deanna and then Rianne. Within minutes, she was ready to go. In the distance, the bell rang for the next lesson.

"Time's up." sighed Lu. "Oh god, I don't want to go!" She hid her face in her hands as Deanna stepped forward to comfort her.

"Come on." she said quietly. "We'll go with you. It's Defence Against the Dark Arts next anyway, not like we're missing anything important."

Luella recovered herself and gathered her things, putting on her cloak, slinging her bag over her shoulder, carefully trying to persuade Sooty to get into her basket, before turning to her trunk. And realising she'd never manage it without magic. She could have cried. So many things, so many trivial little acts that she'd taken for granted before, that were now rendered completely impossible. How on earth was she going to manage without magic?

Fortunately, Marlie sensed what was up, and one Levitation Charm later, had the heavy box hovering about a foot off the ground, ready to move.

Deanna turned to her friend. "Come on. Time to go. Glam yourself up. Show them you're not afraid."

Luella nodded and drew a Glamour around all four of them, one that made them look not like a disgraced schoolgirl and friends, but like a queen and her retinue. Even Rianne seemed to cheer up a little, although she obviously couldn't see the change.

"Ready?" asked Marlie.

"No." said Luella. "But I suppose I'll have to be. Come on. Let's hit the road." She took one last look around the little room that they called home, bidding it farewell and promising silently that she'd be back, some way, somehow. Then, taking a deep breath, she opened the door and left.

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The common room fell silent as they entered it. Luella's little performance before hadn't gone unnoticed, and it seemed that most of them now knew that Luella Martin was off. Well, they had to find out sooner or later, Luella reflected. After all, there wasn't much they could do to her know. But she did fear for her friends and what they'd have to deal with. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Ginny watching her with tears rolling down her cheeks, visibly trembling despite Lydia's whispered words of comfort. Once more, Luella felt a wave of hatred of Lucius Malfoy and all his kin. She wasn't too bothered about her own suffering, after all this was war. But Ginny didn't deserve to be caught up in the fallout.

Luella didn't look at Ginny for long. She didn't look at anyone. Let them think what they liked. Eyes fixed straight ahead, trying to ignore the stares, she made for the door.

Until Marlie spoke. "Wait up. There's just one thing I need to do before you go. It won't take long."

Luella stopped and turned to watch as Marlie stepped away from the little procession and walked over to her cousin. Draco got to his feet as she approached, looking suitably guilty and more than a little confused. For a moment, Marlie did nothing, just stood in front of him with a contemptuous look of disgust on her face which made her kinship with Narcissa Malfoy abundantly clear to anyone who cared to look. Draco backed off. But not far enough.

Without warning, Marlie reached back and dealt him a fierce slap which echoed around the common room and sent the boy staggering back, slipping over on his beanbag and collapsing into it. Rubbing his cheek, he looked despondently up at her.

"That was uncalled-for, Marls."

"I don't think so, Malfoy." Marlie's voice could have withered the Whomping Willow at a hundred paces. "You sicken me, *cousin*. The only good thing I can say about you is that at least you get it from your father and it's not from my side of the family. Now stay out of my way before I do something worse." She swept away from him and rejoined her friends. "Let's go."

Luella turned away and led them out of the common room. Slowly, normality began to descend once more on the Serpent's Nest. However, as they left the room, a buried memory began resurfacing in Deanna's mind. A thought that wouldn't go away. *He'd called her Marls...*

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Professor Snape was waiting for them as they arrived outside the school. Once they'd left the Nest, Luella had switched the Glamour to one of concealment, allowing them to move through the crowds unnoticed. Putting on a show for her fellow Slyths was one thing, but Luella had no desire to face the rather more hostile reaction she'd be likely to get from everyone else. Bravery was one thing, but stupidity was quite another.

Snape did not seem surprised by their sudden appearance.

"I thought you'd choose that method of arrival. Lucius has obviously yet to appreciate that even without a wand, you're still a force to be reckoned with." The smile of appreciation faded as he indicated the carriage before him. "Time to go, Luella."

Luella nodded, biting her lip. This was it. All theatrics over, this was stark reality. Going home. Expelled. Leaving. Really leaving. Malfoy might have been put in his place, but it didn't change things. He might be tormented by guilt, but she wouldn't be there to see it. Now she just faced a lonely journey home, and not much of a welcome when she got there. Granted, she wouldn't have to deal with furious parents, not if Caitlin had done her job properly, but it still wouldn't be much of a homecoming.

Marlie and Deanna saw her things into the carriage without a word, before her friends turning to face her. Marlie hugged her first, wishing her good luck and her telling not to worry, she'd give Malfoy the kicking of his life on her behalf. Next came Rianne, who once more whispered how sorry she was at not having been able to warn her,

before regaining a semblance of her old self and telling her to sit tight, she was going to start organising a campaign to Reinstate the Slytherin One and with any luck she might even be able to come back, but if not, at least she'd get lots of notoriety and be able to make millions by selling her story. Luella couldn't help laughing at that. Trust Rianne to see that side of things. Then finally Luella came to Deanna.

Neither of them said anything. Some things there just weren't words for. Instead they just hugged each other.

"See you later, mate." was all Deanna said.

"Count on it." Luella whispered back, before letting her go and giving her one last look before getting into the carriage. Snape closed the door behind her.

"You will come and visit, won't you?" Luella asked, choked by a sudden fear that he'd break his word, that the wounds of the distant and not-so-distant past would be too much for him.

She needn't have worried. Snape hid his scars well.

"You have my word." he promised, patting her hand gently as she leaned through the open window. "I promised I'd look after you and I will. You'll see me soon enough."

Luella smiled. One thing to look forward to anyway. "Take care of Deanna for me too, won't you? She's not as tough as she makes out."

Snape's expression softened in the way it always did when Deanna's name was mentioned. "I'll do everything I can for her. She'll be fine."

"Thanks." Luella said, a lump in her throat. A relief to know that when Deanna's anger faded and the reality hit home, that there'd be someone there for her, not that she'd really expected Snape to do anything else.

And then Snape was stepping back and motioning to the driver, and the carriage began to move. Her friends waved to her for as long as they could, but before long the carriage turned the corner and Luella was gone.

Silence fell on the little crowd gathered outside Hogwarts. It was done. Over. Luella was gone, and with no immediate prospect of return. A pallor of gloom descended as the shock began to wear off and the reality of it all sank in. Deanna in particular shuddered as the agony of parting finally hit home. She could almost sense the bond between them stretching further and further as Luella travelled away.

Seeming to sense that Deanna best needed solitude right now, Marlie and Rianne retreated to the school, leaving Deanna and Snape alone.

Deanna didn't react as Snape approached and put his arm round her. However, after a few moments, she reached out and clutched gratefully at his hand. They stayed like that for a few minutes more before Deanna finally spoke.

"I miss her."

"I know." came the response. "So do I."

"This is the furthest we've ever been apart, you know." she said. "We grew up together, went to school together, played together, came here together. We even went on holiday together half the time. Her parents felt sorry for me being on my own, so they'd invite me along. Mum'd always pay my way for me, and give me plenty of spending money. I didn't always go, but even those times, it never felt like it did now. I could always feel her there at some level, knew she wasn't really far away. Now though..." She shuddered once more, tears pricking at her eyes. "It feels like she's died or something. Feels like she's being torn away from me, and every step she takes is ripping part of me out with her..." She broke off at this point, hiding her eyes as a sob forced its way out of her. Snape turned her round and held her close to him, guessing only too well what it must feel like.

He waited while Deanna sobbed in his arms, angry, choking sobs that were as much hate for those who'd done this as they were for the pain of parting. It was catching too - the sound of his daughter sobbing raised his own anger towards Lucius Malfoy and anyone else who'd had a hand in this. *Damn you, Lucius. If only I could make you feel what I'm feeling now. But of course - you don't have a daughter, do you?* No, Lucius Malfoy most certainly didn't. Snape wondered if Draco inspired the same feelings of protective rage. Probably not, although that would also depend on Lucius having a heart.

It wasn't just anger on Deanna's behalf either. Already he was missing the young Redeemer. Half his age she might be, a student of his she might be, but in some ways she was almost an equal. Healer, confidant... friend. One tough enough not to run from darkness, gentle enough to love regardless, smart enough not to get caught up in things not her fate, at least he hoped so. Last thing he wanted was for his problems to ensnare her - she had enough of her own. Yet he grieved most keenly for the loss of someone to talk to, someone who listened, really listened, and didn't judge or demand anything in return. Who knew his secrets and did not run. It wasn't until you lost something that you realised just how much you needed it, was it?

"Do you know who it was?" The words brought his own thoughts to a halt. Deanna had broken away and was now watching him intensely.

"Who what was?" The question had caught him off-guard, and thinking about his dark secrets made him especially vulnerable to Deanna's gaze. He really didn't like the way she was looking at him at all.

"Who betrayed Lu."

That was better. Far safer ground. "No, Deanna, I have no idea. I suspect Draco Malfoy may have been involved, but you can hardly call his actions a betrayal. He is after all your enemy. You can't really blame him for using information that fell into his hands. However, his informant is another matter. Someone has been letting our secrets slip."

"Someone on our side." said Deanna thoughtfully.

"Indeed. I have no idea who though. But I'm sure you'll find out."

"Trust me. I will. I already have one lead." Deanna's eyes glimmered coldly and Snape gave silent thanks that Deanna was not directing her anger at him.

"Excellent. I can rely on you then to ensure that a suitable revenge is carried out?"

"You can."

"Wonderful. The usual caveats apply of course."

"What, you'll give me room to manoeuvre as long as I'm discreet?" grinned Deanna.
"Honestly sir, you're such a bad example to us sometimes."

Snape just shrugged. "There's times when these matters are best settled privately. I think you'll be safe, providing you have no witnesses."

"Right you are then, sir." Deanna looked at him again, this time rather more gently.
"Sir, will you really be visiting Lu?"

"Of course. I have to make sure she's pursuing her studies properly after all."

"Right, right. Just that... will you keep an eye on her for me? Make sure she's alright, that she's coping and stuff?"

Snape had to laugh at this. "You know, that's exactly what she asked me about you. Don't worry, child. I shall make sure that she is well at all times. She will be fine."

Deanna nodded and clutched his hand again with a smile. "Thanks, sir. You've been brilliant through all this."

"Not brilliant enough to save your friend." Snape said bitterly. Deanna tightened her grip.

"You did your best. I know you wouldn't let Lu go without a fight."

"Exactly. I went in fighting when cunning and artifice would have served me better. I know you're as committed to the warrior's path as your mother, but don't ever neglect the more common Slytherin ways, will you?"

"With you as teacher? Not likely." Deanna laughed. She became sombre almost immediately. "Better go in, I suppose. Face the school. Wonder if everyone knows yet."

"I believe the headmaster plans to make an announcement at lunchtime, but the staff already know."

"Damn, and I've got Lockhart next too." sighed Deanna. "And I'm already late."

"I'll make your excuses." Snape reassured her. "And now, let's go in. Time to start adjusting. It won't be easy, of that I have no doubt, but if you have any problems, if you need to talk, then you know where to find me."

Deanna smiled and nodded, allowing him to lead her inside, although her anxiety about the future had only been partly allayed. However, it was enough to know that she was not alone. Luella might be gone, but there would be help if she needed it. And so, drawing a breath, she prepared to face the music.

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Chapter Twenty Two Crime and Punishment

Deanna left him in the Entrance Hall, heading for her Defence Against the Dark Arts lesson with Lockhart. Severus pitied the poor girl. On top of the morning they'd all had, to have to put up with him next. It was as if fate couldn't resist heaping one last indignity on her.

However, his thoughts didn't stay with Deanna long. He'd almost made it to the dungeon entrance when a voice called his name.

"Ah, there you are Severus." He turned. It was Dumbledore.

"Headmaster." The temperature of his voice announced to anyone who cared to listen that he was not best pleased with his employer at the moment. But if it bothered the old wizard, he didn't show it.

"Well, it has been an interesting morning, has it not?" Dumbledore sounded as casual as if all that had happened had been a simple debate over the finer points of magical philosophy.

"If you say so, Headmaster." Severus did not look the older man in the eye. He didn't want even Dumbledore seeing how deep his wounds went.

"Indeed, Severus. A proper puzzle all this is. Here we have a perfectly well-adjusted young Muggle-born, with no magical antecedents whatsoever, bearing the Mark of the Tal-y-Rhys, and possessing their famed ability to talk to snakes." Dumbledore watched Severus carefully for a reaction and was gratified to see him flinch at the mention of the name of the Tal-y-Rhys. Concealing his own satisfaction, he decided to dig a little deeper. "And then the mystery deepens as Lucius Malfoy accuses her of doing something she's clearly innocent of and has her expelled, Jupiter knows why."

It was at this that Severus's self-control finally snapped.

"Ah, so you admit she's been framed!" he snarled, rounding on the Headmaster with murder in his eyes.

"Oh, of course Severus." Dumbledore replied, affable to the last. "That much is obvious. Question is, why? Why would Lucius Malfoy trouble to get an ordinary Muggle-born expelled? I know he's not overfond of them, but with the current troubles, there's really no need to do anything when the Heir could do it for him. And while he does indulge Draco, I doubt even Lucius would step in to get people expelled for him." Dumbledore's friendly exterior faded just a little as his eyes bored into the Potions master's. "Any thoughts, Severus?"

"Thoughts. He asks me for my thoughts." Severus laughed, anger overriding his usual diplomacy. "My thoughts, Headmaster? My thoughts are these. Do you have any idea what you have let happen? Do you have any idea what Malfoy has just done? Do you realise what is riding out of this school as we speak??"

"I've no idea, but I'm sure you'll enlighten me." said Dumbledore.

"A witch the like of whom has not been seen in Hogwarts since the school days of Medea Tyler and Minerva McGonagall." Severus raged at him. "Maybe not since the Founding. The future hope of us all. A witch of such power that one day the world will tremble at her passing and offer up its riches on a plate. And a witch of such humility that she'll no doubt blush with embarrassment and turn it down because she doesn't want the attention. She's caring, kindhearted, loyal, understanding, sensitive, generous... One of the most wonderful people I've ever known..." Severus broke off, unable to speak and unwilling to reveal the true extent of his pain. Unfortunately for him, Dumbledore knew him too well to be put off.

"I know how you felt about her, Severus." He placed a hand on his arm, a gesture of comfort which Severus found oddly touching despite its simplicity. "I know how close you were. She's a very special young witch, there is no doubt about that. I'm rather sad to see her depart myself, and not least because you need her as much she needs you."

Severus finally found the strength to answer. "It's so pitiful, isn't it? All it takes is a few words of kindness and treating me as if I'm not a complete monster, and I'm anybody's aren't I? Still, I'm up to three friends now. If I play my cards right, I might one day be able to count them on the fingers of two hands." He covered his eyes, shielding them from that too gentle gaze of Dumbledore's. "That's what gets me, Albus. It's not that Lucius has derailed Melissa's and my best-laid plans. It's not that he's deprived Slytherin of one of its brightest stars, and destabilised its internal hierarchy, possibly dangerously. It's that he's taken away one of my friends."

Dumbledore inhaled deeply, sadness in his eyes, but buried beneath, understanding. He took Severus by the elbow, indicating for the younger wizard to follow him.

"I'm sorry, Albus." said Severus, composing himself. "I know it's unprofessional, I know I shouldn't allow myself to get so close to one of my students, but I can't help myself. Can't help the way I feel."

"Understandable." Severus finally allowed himself to look Dumbledore in the eye and saw to his surprise that the old man was smiling. "She's no ordinary student after all. Not every day you have the Second Heir of Slytherin in your charge after all."

"What?" Severus gasped, horrified that the words had been spoken out loud so publicly. "Headmaster, keep your voice down! Anyone could be listening."

Dumbledore nodded, his suspicions confirmed. "As I thought. It's more than just a legend, and it's happening now. Which I knew anyway, but it's nice to hear it confirmed."

Severus was still trying to fathom out how the Headmaster had discovered what was meant to be a closely guarded secret. "But what... how... Who told you?" he demanded.

Dumbledore just smiled. "You're not the only one who got themselves involved with a Tal-y-Rhys. Come on, come back to my office and I'll tell you all about it."

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Severus settled himself into the high-backed leather chair opposite Dumbledore's, accepting the brandy the Headmaster offered him. He'd been about to decline, professional to the last, but then a little voice inside had suggested otherwise. He had a feeling that he might well need the brandy before this conversation was out. Making sure that the decanter was within easy reach, he settled himself for what promised to be an interesting next half hour.

"So which Tal-y-Rhys were you involved with then?" he asked with a wry grin. "Please don't tell me it was Medea Tyler. I don't think I could deal with knowing you were Caitlin Tyler's father."

"Of course not Severus, don't be silly." Dumbledore paused, watching Severus closely, waiting for the relief to reach its peak and the moment of total relaxation to set in. "I'm her grandfather."

It was really rather gratifying to see the normally controlled Potions Master begin choking, spluttering, going red in the face and downing his brandy in one, before reaching for the decanter and pouring another, then downing that one too. Mean, but gratifying. Serve him right for not letting me in on it sooner, Dumbledore thought to himself.

"You're... her... grandfather?" Severus finally forced the words out.

"Oh yes." Dumbledore confirmed. "Charybdis Tyler and I were married for twenty years." Here, his mood turned sombre. "Gods know how though. It was alright at first, but she was a lot younger than me, and although she'd been a fiercely independent young thing when I met her, she started getting broody after a while. Turned out to be the usual story, she wanted children, I felt I was too old for that sort of thing, we argued, I buried myself in my work, we drifted apart and finally she forced the issue by getting herself pregnant. Of course, I then stupidly went and told her I didn't want a child, had made that perfectly clear on many occasions and couldn't she get rid of it. Yes, Severus, I know now it was a stupid thing to say. And yes I have regretted it many, many times since." The old man sighed, sadness creeping back in but for his own problems now. "I regretted it as soon as I'd said it. I regretted it even more when

Carrie ran off crying and locked herself in our bedroom all night. And nothing prepared me for how I felt when she came down the next morning, perfectly composed and announced she was leaving. She did too. Just packed her things and went back to the manor. Filed for divorce a few weeks later and refused to speak to me ever again. I never did see our daughter, not until she started Hogwarts. I didn't tell her I was her father. Carrie would have murdered me, I'm sure. Besides, I felt I didn't deserve it after the way I'd treated her mother. So I just watched over her, watched her grow into a beautiful, intelligent young woman, just like her mother, but with more than a few similarities to me. She had the same headstrong bravado that I'd had as a boy, the same reckless warrior courage, the fiery temper that Caitlin and Deanna both seem to have inherited..."

"So that's your fault, is it?" Severus interrupted. "So next time I find Deanna pouncing on some unsuspecting young Hufflepuff I can blame you, can I?"

Dumbledore laughed. "I can see I've let myself in for an interesting time for telling you all this! But really, Severus, I can't see Deanna pouncing for no reason. Not her style at all. If she starts savaging someone, they've more than likely earned it. And I'm sure it will be done in private. She is a Slytherin after all, and she has your sense of cold-blooded cunning."

"Why thank you, Albus..." Severus began before stopping and cursing to himself. Another secret revealed. Dumbledore just smiled that same bittersweet little smile.

"Yes Severus, I do know that as well. You think I've not seen the way you watch her and guessed the cause? I remember all too well watching Medea in the same way and not being able to do anything. And of course she looks far more like you than Medea ever did to me. I was already an old man by the time Medea arrived here - you're still young."

"I don't feel it." Severus said softly. "I can't tell her and if she ever finds out it'll destroy her. Her mother won't kill me, but she just might."

"She won't." Dumbledore paused, a flicker of anxiety appearing in his eyes. "Will she?"

"She's liable to do something crazy, as you surely know only too well." Severus said, flicking Dumbledore a look of something that could have been anger or coldness or contempt. It was difficult to tell with Slytherins. "Gryffindor passion mixed with Slytherin ruthlessness. Anything could happen."

"It could indeed." Dumbledore appeared mildly alarmed, before disappointment reasserted itself. "All the same, I would still like to see the two of you reconciled. That family's had a history of girls growing up never knowing their fathers, I'd like to see the pattern broken. Medea never knew me as her father, Caitlin lost hers when she was only three, and now we have Deanna fatherless too. I feel somehow responsible for starting the whole thing off, and I'd like to see it ended in my lifetime if possible."

"Some chance." Severus laughed bitterly.

"Well, you never know. But I will say this - as one who's been there before you, I'm here for you. If you ever need to talk, come and find me." Dumbledore's sadness lifted as he changed the subject. "And now back to the matter in hand. Young Luella, the Slytherin Redeemer. Don't fret, it's not widely known. But Carrie was always one for researching her family history, and told me all about it and the true history of the Tal-y-Rhys. It was her hope and her fear, that it would come in her lifetime, or that of her child. Well, she was right." he sighed, grief flitting across his face once more. "Her daughter certainly saw it happen, and it cost her her life. But that was then, and I like to think Medea's last sacrifice helped make it safe for the Redeemer to grow up, without the menace of the First Heir hanging over her."

"I don't suppose we'll ever know for sure, will we?" Severus asked half-heartedly.
"Caitlin was the only adult survivor of that night and she wasn't there when the Dark Lord killed Potter and her mother - Melissa told me that Caitlin and Lily had already fled with the children when he stormed the house."

"True, true, but no one kills the Lady of Tal-y-Rhys on her home ground without her collusion in the matter, and the only reason I can think of for that is if she planned for her death to activate a spell that would ensure her child and grandchild were protected from harm."

"I thought you said it was Lily's death that made Potter able to survive Voldemort's attack?" Severus pointed out.

"Oh, most certainly. But many people died defending children or other loved ones, and that never stopped Voldemort. Lily managed it, and I don't think that it was a coincidence that the Tal-y-Rhys were involved. But it doesn't matter now."
Dumbledore returned his concentration to the matter in hand. "Our main concern must be for the living. What arrangements have you made for her?"

"Caitlin's collecting her." Severus replied. "We plan for her to stay at the Tylers' until summer - it's no Tal-y-Rhys Manor, but it's still well shielded from possible attack or Ministry interference. She'll keep studying there, and if she's not reinstated by next year, we're sending her to New Hogwarts."

"An excellent plan." said Dumbledore approvingly. "Of course, if things carry on as they are, it could be that a lot more students could be attending New Hogwarts next year. But it won't come to that, I am sure. I think that the Redeemer will be needed here again before the year is out, and I think she will succeed in clearing her name. I don't think you need worry, Severus."

"All the same, it seems a long way off at the moment." Severus replied, his anxiety showing through as he began to chew one of his fingernails. Worry finally getting the better of him, he took his hand from his mouth and pounded the desk. "Damn it, Albus, why did you let her get expelled at all? Don't tell me you couldn't have prevented it somehow! Had you thought to warn her, we could have worked out some kind of strategy! Couldn't she have gone up against the Heir equally, if not more, effectively based here? What use is she two hundred miles away?" he snarled at the other wizard.

"She may not be much 'use' as you put it, Severus," Dumbledore retorted, "but she is safe from harm. You're too upset to appreciate this at the moment, but the situation is far from bleak. She's out of reach of the Heir for now, and her other enemies now consider her neutralised, which means she faces no further danger. She is also now to be taught exclusively by Caitlin and your good self. I don't know what you're planning, but the chances of Caitlin sticking to the usual curriculum are remote, to say the least. She's going to be receiving the best Defence Against the Dark Arts education you could hope to find. Think about it, Severus. She's going to be spending the next three months being taught by the best. By the time she does return, she won't know herself and neither will anyone else. She'll have gone as low as she can, and fought her way back, and that is an incredible psychological boost to anyone. I personally think that no matter how black it looks now, she will be many times stronger in the long run. If the experience doesn't break her, it will turn her into a queen among witches. And her disarming of whoever is really causing the attacks will be all the more effective if he thinks she's no longer a threat."

"Yes," Severus murmured thoughtfully, "yes I think it will. Albus, you may well be right."

"Of course I am, Severus." said Dumbledore comfortingly, before switching on his reproving face. "I must say though, things are truly awry when a Slytherin, especially you of all people, needs a Gryffindor to lecture him on strategy."

"Albus, please." said Severus, a touch testily. Dumbledore's expression did not change in the slightest.

"I also have yet to hear an explanation for why you and Melissa Lovegood never bothered to inform me about Luella earlier."

Severus began squirming underneath that unforgiving gaze. Why, he cursed himself, hadn't he gone with his own intuition when Mel had first told him? Damn the woman, and damn him for listening to her. Ah well. Her idea, her job to take the rap.

"Sorry, Albus." He cast his eyes to the floor, trying to look suitably penitent. "It was Mel's idea. She wasn't happy about non-Slytherins knowing the legends. She wanted it kept quiet, on a strictly need-to-know basis. I was all for telling you, but she wasn't keen on the idea."

Dumbledore seemed only a little mollified. "Well, I suppose she wasn't to know I'd been married to a Tal-y-Rhys - after all, the divorce came through twenty years before she'd even been born. However, that's no excuse. I shall have to have words with her next time I see her." The stern teacher look passed. "And now it merely remains to find out who betrayed our young Redeemer. Severus, can I leave the matter in your hands?"

Severus nodded. "Of course. Your great-granddaughter is already investigating and I feel sure we shall have the matter duly dealt with."

"Good, good." Dumbledore sighed. "You will rein her in, won't you? I know you can heal most injuries, but bringing students back from the dead is beyond even your capabilities."

"I'll do my best." Severus promised. "I think I can convince my overexcitable offspring that it's more fun to leave him alive with the pain. She'll like that idea."

Dumbledore winced. "Now you can't lay that at my door!"

Severus just smiled. "I take full responsibility for the sadism. I'm rather proud of that, it's taken me ages to cultivate."

Dumbledore shook his head as he got up to show Severus out. "Severus, I've known you a long time and I think I can safely call you a friend. But this I tell you, as long as I live, I will never understand Slytherins."

As Dumbledore spoke those words, another former Gryffindor was also demonstrating a total inability to understand Slytherins. Except, unlike Dumbledore, this one didn't have the insight or humility to admit it. It was of course Gilderoy Lockhart.

The Slytherin fourth year had already settled in when Deanna arrived. Luella's absence had been duly noted, and those not already familiar with the situation had soon been filled in. And when Deanna made an entrance, Lockhart was already in full flow on the matter.

"Ah, Miss Tyler!" he grinned at her as she slid into the nearest chair. "Take a seat. I was just passing the good news on to your classmates."

"Good news?" The tone of voice should have alerted Lockhart. It didn't. "What good news."

Lockhart ignored the note of danger in the girl's voice, the note that had immediately had all the other Slytherins reaching for their wands and getting ready to dive under the desk, and Marlie and Rianne getting ready to pounce if need be.

"Why, the news about the Heir of Slytherin, of course!" Lockhart beamed.

"Go on." said Deanna calmly. Too calmly. Behind her, Chris Bryant and Geoff Foxworth began to slink under their desk, so as to avoid getting caught in the crossfire.

"It is my pleasure to inform you that there will be no more attacks!" Lockhart announced, merrily oblivious to the fact that his entire class was looking for cover and edging well away from him. "They've caught the Heir of Slytherin!"

"I see." Deanna's voice was getting stonier by the second. It wasn't quite Avebury yet, but it was well on its way to Stonehenge.

"Yes indeed!" Here, finally, Lockhart's beam faded into moralising sadness. "It is with great sadness that I have to inform you that it was one of your classmates that was responsible. Luella Martin was behind it all along. Even now, punishment has been duly exacted and she's on her way home." He sighed with a melodramatic flourish. "I always suspected she was up to no good. Knew it as soon as I first laid eyes on her. Said as much to Professor Dumbledore at the time. You mark my words, I said to him, the girl's trouble. Up to something, no doubt about it. You watch her, there's something fundamentally untrustworthy about her, I said to him. Of course, I was about to expose her myself, but fortunately for us all, the Headmaster has finally taken action himself and made this school safe once more. Yes, I'm pleased to say that that particular menace has been dealt with once and for all..."

He didn't get the chance to say anything further. Deanna, unable to take any more, had jumped to her feet, snatched up her bag and was now striding purposefully out of the classroom. Ignoring Lockhart's puzzled calls, she kicked the door open and left.

Rianne and Marlie watched her go, before exchanging worried glances. Now what, Rianne seemed to be saying to Marlie. Marlie bit her lip, torn between staying to support Lockhart and going after her friend. She began to finger her necklace anxiously, before coming to a decision. Grabbing her own things, she too got to her feet and left.

Rianne smiled, a thin, humourless smile, but nevertheless one with its own sense of satisfaction. Nonchalant as ever, she collected her things and strolled after her friends.

This decided the rest of the class. As one, they too got to their feet and walked out in silence, not one of them sparing a look for their confused teacher.

As the last of the Slytherins walked out, Lockhart could only stare at their backs in bewilderment.

"Was it something I said?"

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Marlie caught up with Deanna soon enough.

"Deanna, wait!" she shouted as her friend reached the stairs. "Wait up!"

Deanna stopped, turning to face the other girl. Marlie skidded to a halt at once. She'd been prepared for a range of emotions on Deanna's face. Pain. Tears. Sadness. Anger at Lockhart. But not hate. Not the malice she saw there. Certainly not directed at her.

"Deanna?" she asked, beginning to wonder whether this had been such a good idea.
"What's up?"

"What's up, she asks me." Deanna said, her voice still soft and dangerous. "My best friend's been expelled, I have to put up with that tosswit going on about what a bad influence she is, and to cap it all, my other best mate turns out to be the one that shopped her."

Marlie frowned, quite unable to understand what Deanna was on about.. "You what?"

"You heard me."

Marlie scratched her head, still in the dark. "But that's absurd, Rianne wouldn't do something like that, she's as loyal to Lu as you are."

Deanna took a step forward, murder in her eyes. "Exactly."

Marlie backed off, suddenly afraid. "Deanna, what are you saying... oh!" It dawned on her what Deanna meant. If not Rianne, that only left... her. And with that realisation, the fear dissolved as first shock and then furious indignation that Deanna would even think about accusing her came rushing to the fore. "Hey now, it was not me!" she yelled. "I mean, for Gods' sake, Tyler, she was my friend too, how on earth you could even think it might have been me is beyond me. Bloody hell Tyler, I know you're upset, but how paranoid are you, that your first guess has to be me??"

"Not you, eh?" Deanna stepped forward and with one swift move, pinned Marlie to the wall. "Then tell me something, *Marls*." She spat the name at her. "Since when have you and Draco Malfoy been friends, hmm? Hmm?" She gave Marlie a shake. "Don't think I was fooled by that little display in the common room! Covering your tracks, were you? Making sure suspicion wouldn't fall on you by demonstrating you hated him? Come on, Lovegood, I was not born yesterday!"

"I'm not scared of you, Tyler." Marlie hissed. "I'm not some little first year you can intimidate into confessing. I'm your equal, and you know it. Now you can believe me or not, but don't threaten me, because I don't scare easily!"

"Shame." snarled Deanna. "Had you been scared, you might have kept quiet like you swore you would." She increased the pressure, forcing Marlie right up against the wall. True to her word, Marlie responded by glaring back and grasping Deanna's wrists, trying to force her away. A struggle of wills ensued, and things could have turned nasty had Rianne not arrived on the scene.

"Tyler!" she yelled, unable to believe what she was seeing. "What the hell are you doing?"

Deanna released Marlie, who immediately stood back, rubbing her neck and gasping for breath, feeling the indignation-fuelled adrenaline begin to subside, leaving her shaky and more than a little frightened. Deanna in this sort of mood was capable of anything. She just hoped Rianne would be able to smooth things over.

"It's her, Ri." Deanna said, shaking all over herself. "She grassed Lu up to Malfoy."

Rianne turned swiftly to Marlie. "Is this true?"

"No!" snapped Marlie. "I did no such thing, never have and never will. Ri, talk some sense into her, the girl's nuts."

Rianne nodded, seemingly persuaded and turned back to Deanna. "There you go, Tyler. She says she's not guilty. Good enough for you?"

Deanna did not seem convinced. "Then explain why her and Draco are so friendly lately."

"Are they?" said Rianne. "I hadn't noticed. So when did you realise that, then?"

Clever, thought Marlie. Very clever. Getting Deanna to give her evidence without winding her up. Smooth move, Ri.

"Over the holidays." said Deanna. "Draco slipped up and called her Marls while he was looking at the Firebolts. When I challenged him, he just brushed me off by saying she was family and he could call her what he liked. I meant to ask about it, but I forgot. This morning, he called her Marls again, after she'd slapped him. That's when I remembered and realised I'd never got an answer earlier. Ri, she's been mates with him for gods know how long, she knows all about Lu, all it would take would be one slip-up and he'd know!"

"I didn't do it, Deanna." Marlie whispered. "You've got to believe me, I never said a thing to him! Intentionally or otherwise. I promise."

"I believe you." Rianne said calmly. "But there's still this little problem with Malfoy to be resolved. Deanna raises a valid point. Why *is* he using your first name all of a sudden? An explanation would be nice at this point, Marls."

Marlie looked from one to the other. Now here was something she'd rather they hadn't noticed. Damn Malfoy. Why couldn't he have been a little more discreet? However, it looked like she wasn't getting away without an explanation. Rianne and Deanna's brand of Nice Slyth, Nasty Slyth wasn't fun by any means.

"OK, OK." she sighed. "I suppose you'd have found out sooner or later. He used to come round to my house over summer."

She heard Rianne inhale sharply and Deanna laugh in triumph. "See? Told you!"

"Tyler, hear her out." Rianne said firmly. "Go on. Tell us more."

"There's not much to tell." said Marlie quietly. "It started one afternoon in July. Doorbell rings, Sukey goes to answer it, says it's for me. I ask who it is, she says it's Draco Malfoy. I tell her to get rid of him, and he goes away. For the time being. But he comes back a few days later. Again, I tell him to get lost. He goes. But comes back. That time, I go out to see him myself. We argue. I tell him he's not wanted. He pouts and refuses to leave, giving me all this crap about us being family, how can I possibly be so cold-hearted, you know what he's like."

Rianne and Deanna both nodded, knowing exactly what Malfoy was like. Despite themselves, they were both beginning to smile.

"Well, anyway," Marlie continued, "it went on like that, and I think I might have been able to get rid of him even then. Until my dad turned up..."

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"Malfoy, I'm warning you!" Marlie said through gritted teeth. "Go away or else! I've got dispensation to use magic at home, you know, I can hex your arse if I need to!"

Draco pouted. "That's no way to talk to your only cousin, Marlie. Come on, cous, where's your manners? All I want to do is hang out. You know, spin a few tunes, watch a movie, make polite conversation over a few soft drinks, that sort of thing. The kind of thing friends get up to every day."

"We are not," Marlie hissed, "friends! And you are not my only cousin either, I've got three on my dad's side, and you rank well below all of them in my estimation!"

"Not mages though are they?" Draco returned, confidently. Rather too confidently, as a triumphant Marlie proved.

"Actually, yes they are." she cooed. "Rachel and Paul Clearwater, Ravenclaw, soon to be third years. And Penelope Clearwater, soon to be fifth year, also a Ravenclaw. See Malfoy, unlike your family, we like Muggles and mages getting together. Not only did my dad marry a witch, but his sister married a wizard. Now please go away, I've got Laetitia Vettinari's Discmage on the go, and something else for my mum."

"What's that then?" asked Draco, only half-interested. "Quill with feathers that fly out and turn into poison darts?"

"No. Rings with radioactive gemstones." lied Marlie. Wouldn't hurt to have a little misinformation creep back to Lucius Malfoy, after all. Nice quill idea though, she'd have to look into that one.

"Remind me never to buy any jewellery off you then." Draco smirked, before frowning a little. "So what's radioactivity, then? I take it it's not something to do with being able to receive the Muggle Top 40 on your earrings."

Another good idea. Malfoy did have his uses after all.

"No, Malfoy." said Marlie tartly. "It isn't. Now have you quite done bothering me?"

"Not yet, cous. I've got the whole day ahead of me." Draco grinned.

Marlie would have hit back but at that moment things went from bad to worse as Leonard Lovegood arrived.

"Have we got visitors, Marlie? I thought I heard the doorbell go."

"It's nothing, Dad." Marlie called back frantically. "Just someone from school."

"Someone from school?" His interest caught, Leonard hastened to his daughter's side. "Don't keep them waiting on the doorstep then, invite them in! Honestly, teenagers today." He turned to Draco with a smile. "Hello there! So you're from Hogwarts too, are you? I'm Leonard Lovegood, Marlie's father. Pleased to meet you." He extended a hand, which Draco shook warmly.

*"The pleasure is all mine, Mr. Lovegood." Draco released his hand and bowed.
"Draco Malfoy at your service."*

"He is well-mannered, isn't he?" smiled Leonard. "I must say, Marlie, you do have some fascinating friends. Why haven't you introduced me to this one before? Well, well, come in Draco. Have a cup of coffee or a drink, make yourself at home. I know not all of your kind are used to Muggle homes, but I assure you there's plenty of magical stuff here too so you won't feel entirely out of place, and we've got an excellent house-elf if you need anything." He indicated for Draco to follow him in.

"Thank you, Mr. Lovegood." murmured Draco. "It will be a pleasure." Smirking at a dismayed Marlie, he sauntered in as if he'd lived there all his life.

Marlie could only glare at her cousin. As soon as her father's back was turned, she rounded on him.

"Right, you. You might have wormed your way into my dad's good books, but I still don't trust you. Any funny business, any misbehaviour, and you're out, OK?"

Draco looked at her with wounded eyes. "Marls, you disappoint me. Surely you don't believe me completely lacking in social graces? As a guest in your home, I promise to behave impeccably."

"You'd better." Marlie warned him. "Or you're gone."

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To Marlie's surprise, Draco behaved admirably, and was far less thrown by all the Muggle technology than she'd thought. The quarter of Muggle genes was obviously stronger than she'd given him credit for.

It didn't hurt, however, that the first room she took him to was the kitchen. As Sukey's domain, this was one of the few rooms in the house that looked just like its mage equivalent, with a huge black stove, an open fire with a bubbling cauldron, pots and pans hanging from the roof, big wooden tables and ingredients everywhere. However, even here there were signs that all was not as it seemed. Down one side of the room was a Muggle worktop with a fridge, blender, kettle, toaster and microwave, along with a bread bin and a biscuit tin, and a few scattered pieces of Muggle cutlery. This was the space the family used to produce snacks. Draco raised an eyebrow, evidently struck by the contrast.

"Interesting, very interesting." Draco commented. "So, is the entire house this schizophrenic or is it just the kitchen having an identity crisis?"

"Shut it, Malfoy." snapped Marlie sourly. "Do you want a drink or not?"

"I suppose so." sighed Draco. "Get me one of your bizarre Muggle concoctions then."

Muttering, Marlie reached inside the fridge and pulled out a can of Coke, before opening a nearby cupboard and pulling out a glass.

"Ice?" she asked, although her voice could have chilled the drink on its own.

"If you don't mind."

"Ice, please, Sukey."

A handful of ice cubes immediately appeared in the glass. Marlie handed it to him with the Coke can and leant back, a sadistic smile on her face. This was going to be fun. Draco was looking at the can very dubiously.

"There's meant to be liquid in this?"

Marlie nodded. "Oh yes. Once you get it open, it just pours out."

"Well thank you very much." snapped Draco. "You are the epitome of helpfulness, you know that?"

"I do try." Marlie smirked as Draco puzzled over it, setting the glass down on the workbench as he tried to figure out how to get his can open. Unfortunately for Marlie, Draco was neither stupid nor afraid to experiment, and a few minutes later, had mastered the art of ringpulls.

"Sweet Coca-Cola, you shall be mine!" Draco gloated as he poured the contents into his glass, watching it fizz up. "Gods, look at it, it's like one of Professor Snape's potions. Hope it doesn't taste like it." He took a sip and smiled. A proper smile, too, not a sneer or a smirk. Genuine pleasure.

"Like it?" Marlie asked.

"Like it?" Draco lowered the glass and looked at Marlie, all scorn gone to reveal a completely different Draco Malfoy, one she'd never seen before and hadn't even known existed. A Draco innocent, carefree... happy. "It's fantastic. That does it, Marls, I'm coming over here every day from now on. Just keep me in Coca-Cola, and I shall be all yours."

"Oh gods." moaned Marlie. "What did I do to deserve that?" But oddly enough, she found she wasn't feeling that bad about the prospect.

Draco took another sip. "So, what do you do for fun around here?"

Marlie thought. She wasn't ready to let him see her workroom, not just yet. However, there were other ways of keeping him entertained.

"How do you fancy watching a blue hedgehog on speed chase around a fantasy landscape after little golden rings?"

Draco looked at her but reined in the first remark that came to mind. It could be a Muggle thing, he told himself. Best not make a fool of oneself.

"Go on then, Lovegood. Initiate me into the lunacy."

"So we spent the afternoon playing Sonic on my Megadrive." Marlie finished. "He didn't stay for dinner, said his parents expected him back and he didn't want to be late or they'd start asking awkward questions about where he'd been. He didn't think they'd approve of him coming round to my place."

"Who'd have thought it." commented Deanna. "I've got something in common with Malfoy's parents."

"Tyler!" snapped Marlie. "Leave it out. I keep telling you, it was different. He was different. He wasn't at all like he is in school. He was actually alright. Still sarcastic, but he was witty sarcastic not cruel sarcastic. He was nice to my dad, both to his face and behind his back." Marlie started to go misty-eyed as she recalled the summer gone by. "I spent the entire holiday educating him about Muggles and their ways, and he loved it. He used to spend hours with my dad asking about how things worked and what he did for a living. You should have seen his face when Dad told him he worked on aircraft engines, he couldn't wait to hear more. He wasn't putting it on, I'd swear to it. We'd spend ages playing computer games, listening to music, watching videos, or just talking. I took him out to Exeter a few times too, got him some Muggle clothes and some CDs, took him to the cinema, even took him to a football match once although he didn't think much of it. Can't say I blame him." Marlie sniffed. "But Tyler, while he was with me, he was a completely different person. Like he didn't have to pretend or keep up an image of hating all things Muggle. Like he was secretly fascinated by it all and was finally able to indulge without anyone knowing. He told me himself that hanging around at my place was much better than being at home. Reckoned it was far more interesting. Said it made a change being able to act like a kid for once. You know, he's not all he seems. We had a great time over summer. We had fun, y'know? We got on. We were almost... friends." Here Marlie cast her eyes down. "I though we were friends."

"Rule number one, Marlie." Deanna said, showing very little sympathy for her.
"Never trust a Malfoy."

"Don't I know it. Bastard." laughed Marlie. "We get back to school and it's as if none of it ever happened. I'm back less than a week, and what happens? Cheating bastard goes and steals my job." She stared Deanna straight in the eyes, with a ferocity that caused even her to start. "Do you really think after that, that I'd betray Lu to him? That's why losing out to him hurt so much. I really thought he wasn't all bad. Really thought we were mates. Then he goes and stabs me in the back. Damn him. I feel so used." Marlie fell silent and looked away, wanting nothing more than to be alone with her misery.

Deanna watched her, and in that moment, felt the hostility fade away. She couldn't stay angry with Marlie for long, not seeing her so betrayed in her turn. She also believed that Marlie probably hadn't said anything to Malfoy. She hadn't missed the phrase Marlie had used, "...almost friends."

"Marls, don't." Deanna tried to console her, stepping forward and putting an arm round her. "He's Malfoy, that's what he's like. It's not your fault."

"I didn't tell him." Marlie whispered, sounding like she was trying very hard not to cry. "I never said a word about Lu, I swear. I never said, and he never asked."

"I believe you." said Deanna softly, just softly enough for Marlie to hear her. "I'm sorry."

Marlie didn't say anything, just sniffled a bit, before turning to Deanna and giving her a hug. The two of them stayed like that for a while, until Deanna finally let Marlie go and stepped back with a wry grin.

"Just out of interest, what sort of thing did you and Malfoy find to talk about?"

Marlie blushed at this and started to look rather sheepish. When she did speak it was in a very small voice that Deanna had to strain to hear.

"Erm... we spent most of the time talking about the finer points of Bagpuss and comparing the relative merits of Rainbow and Button Moon."

Deanna couldn't help herself. The laughter just forced itself out, and she doubled up in a fit of the giggles which lasted for a good minute. Finally, she composed herself.

"Damn, Marls, that's just sad enough to be true. Oh dear. Draco Malfoy liking Bagpuss. Who'd have thought it."

"So I take it you two are friends again then." came Rianne's voice. Both girls jumped at the sound of her voice. They'd forgotten she was there. But there she certainly was, leaning against the wall, watching them with a smile.

Marlie looked at Deanna. Deanna looked at Marlie. They both turned to Rianne.

"Looks like it."

"Guess so."

"If she cuts out the psychopathic episodes, I'll cut down on the narcissism and obsessing over kids TV."

"You got yourself a deal, Marls." They both shook hands. Rianne breathed a sigh of relief.

"Excellent. You two had me worried for a while there. When I saw you two at each other's throats, just about ready to kill each other..."

"Less of the we, thank you." Marlie interrupted. "There was only one of us intent on murdering anyone and it wasn't me."

"Yes, well, be that as it may." Rianne continued. "For a while there, I thought we'd gone back to the bad old days, and with Lu gone we just can't afford any serious fallings out. You two got me?" She gave them both very piercing looks.

"Got it." Marlie nodded.

"I hear ya, Ri." Deanna sighed. "I was out of line, I know, it's just that what with everything that's happened this morning, my nerves are stretched to breaking point and I'm just not sure what to think about anything any more. I didn't think Lu'd ever get expelled, but she did, and it's just thrown me. I mean, right now anything could be possible, and I just wasn't thinking clearly. Went off at the first possible suspicion and got it wrong." She looked guiltily away. "Sorry, Marls."

"Eh, not to worry." Marlie shrugged. "I'll let it go." She narrowed her eyes. "This time. Don't do it again."

"I won't." Deanna promised.

"That's alright then." said Marlie, still a little miffed but willing to overlook it.

"And now your little quarrel's in the past," said Rianne, "perhaps we can now get back to finding out who really did tell on Lu, using our brains rather than our adrenal glands." This was said with a rather pointed look in Deanna's direction. "Now Deanna, if you'd been thinking, you'd have realised that whoever it was must know about Lu being a Parselmouth and having the Mark. This rules out Marls, on the grounds that none of us, Lu included, knew she had Parseltongue until the Duelling Club, and there was no Mark until last Halloween. By that time, Marlie's friendship with Draco was long over as he'd pinched her job. No way is she going to have anything to do with him after that. So it's someone else. So, who else other than us four, knew about the Mark and the Parseltongue?"

"Well, Snape I suppose." said Deanna dubiously.

"Hardly going to be him, is it?" Marlie scoffed. "Why not say Dumbledore and have done?"

"Not him." said Rianne. "Or any other adult. It's a student. So, out of all the students at Hogwarts other than us, who knew? Who does Lu trust enough to let in on something like that?"

"There's Penny, but it can't be her, she's been Petrified." said Marlie thoughtfully. "Apart from her, the only other people Lu's close to are Harry and Hermione."

"Not Harry." said Deanna. "He just doesn't do that. He's too honest, and he likes Lu enough to give her the benefit of the doubt. If he suspected her, he'd come to us first and make enquiries."

"But he does know about the Parseltongue - Lu did say she'd let it slip to him." Marlie pointed out.

"All the same though, Harry Potter just does not betray his friends like that." said Deanna.

"No, but he doesn't keep secrets from them either." Rianne said, now beginning to look very thoughtful indeed. "First thing he'd do would be to tell Hermione and Ron."

"Well, it's not Hermione." said Marlie confidently. "She'd go to a teacher if she thought something was up. She certainly wouldn't have anything to do with Malfoy, and he wouldn't listen to her any way."

"Which just leaves..." Deanna looked at her two friends as the same thought occurred to all three of them at once. Speaking in unison, they all named the one revealed as the villain of the piece.

"Ron."

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"It's him. It must have been." panted Rianne as she ran to keep up with Deanna, who was striding ahead, wand out, expression grim. "He was there that day we talked about what was up with Lu. Overheard us. Deanna, he must have heard us mention that her arm kept hurting!"

"I know." said Deanna.

"What are you going to do to him?" asked Marlie, a few paces behind her, sounding just a little too enthralled by the prospect of Ron getting a good kicking.

"I don't know. Something painful."

"There isn't going to be... blood is there?" Marlie asked.

"Maybe."

Marlie digested the thought for a moment before smiling. "Cool."

Meanwhile, the news about Luella had not been slow to travel, and it had by now reached Gryffindor House. Harry and his two friends were making their way across the Entrance Hall on their way to lunch, too shocked to speak. At least, Harry was. Ron, on the other hand, was trailing behind, squirming uncomfortably and trying not to look too shifty.

Hermione was doing her best to comfort Harry.

"She didn't do it, Harry. She can't have done, she's not like that."

"Won't bring her back." Harry whispered.

"But if she's innocent, she'll appeal, she has to." said Hermione, doing her best to boost his confidence. "She'll be back before you know it."

Harry just laughed. "You think so? Mione, if the justice system round here worked, she'd still be here." He stared at his feet. "She's gone, Herm. Gone. For good. I'll never see her again." He buried his head in his hands. "God, I miss her."

Ron bit his lip. He'd never stopped to think how Harry would feel about Luella leaving. He'd been far too concerned with getting rid of her and banishing her influence. He'd just assumed that once she'd gone, things would be back to normal and it would be just the three of them again, without Harry dropping everything and running over to talk to her as soon as the Slytherin put in an appearance. How wrong he'd been. Luella's presence was still hanging in the air, and it was all the more bizarrely tangible for her not being there physically. What have I done, he thought. What the hell have I done? He's still thinking about her, except now he's miserable too. Well done, Ron.

He tried to shake the vision of Luella Martin's eyes accusing him. No good. Still there, tormenting him, waking his conscience from hibernation, sending him headfirst into a guilt trip. I'm sorry, he thought to himself. This was wrong. The uneasy notion came unbidden, that maybe the Second Heir legend was true after all. Maybe it wasn't the real attacker he'd got expelled at all, but the one hope for defeating them. Shivering, he edged that bit closer to Hermione. Last thing he wanted was for his stupidity to do any more damage to their group.

And then all three noticed something that made them all look up. The crowd of students around them had all stopped talking and were moving very swiftly away, those that weren't being pushed to one side.

"What the hell...?" said Harry, bemused.

Hermione stared into the distance, frowning. "It's as if they're all trying to get out of the way of something. Or maybe someone."

Ron felt his blood freeze at this. Slowly, very slowly, he turned to see what the other students were running away from. And felt his heart start pounding as he saw them.

The crowd was parting as if divided by some enigmatic unstoppable force. And that force consisted of Deanna Tyler elbowing her way through, with Marlie Lovegood and Rianne Stormosi flanking her. All three had their wands out, and all had very determined expressions on their faces. Determined to the point of ruthlessness. Ron locked eyes with Deanna and in that moment realised. They knew.

He didn't waste any time. As soon as Deanna's eyes met his, her face twisting into a snarl, his body sprang into action. Quite involuntarily, his legs turned him around and started carrying him off, trying to put as much distance between him and Deanna as possible.

Seeing this, the Slytherin phalanx broke.

"Get him." Deanna hissed, breaking into a run herself, with her friends hot on her heels.

Panicking, Ron bolted for the door. If he could just make it to the Great Hall, with teachers and prefects around, he'd be safe. He almost made it too. With longer legs than the three girls, he was able to make the most of his head start and was nearly there.

Until Draco Malfoy appeared out of nowhere, standing between him and the doorway with his foot outstretched. Ron, going too fast to stop, tripped and found himself sprawling on the ground.

Deanna wasted no time. Ignoring Draco, who slipped away with a smirk, she grabbed Ron by the front of his robes and hauled him to his feet, slamming him against the wall with a strength born of adrenaline and sheer fury.

"I ought to murder you right now, Weasley!" she snarled at him. "You lying, treacherous, fucking BASTARD!" This was followed by a blow to the stomach that had Ron doubling up in pain.

"Deanna, wait, I'm sorry, I- agh!" He was cut off by another blow, harder than the last.

"Miss Tyler to you." she seethed at him, before raising her hand to strike again. Fortunately for Ron, Harry and Hermione had arrived by now, horrified by the unfolding violence.

"Deanna, what are you doing?" gasped Hermione.

"Tyler, leave him alone!" said Harry through gritted teeth, grabbing her wrist and trying to pull her off him. Seeming to relent, Deanna stepped back, a cold smile beginning to spread across her face.

Harry let her go, still uncomprehending. "Deanna, what is up with you? What's Ron done to hurt you?"

"Yeah, I mean, if it's a fight you want, Malfoy's over there." said Hermione, indicating Draco who was watching from the sidelines with his usual smirk.

"Malfoy'll keep." said Deanna, her eyes not leaving Ron for an instant. Although he'd picked himself up by now, he was still shaking and looking like he was about to bolt any second. Or at least, he would have done had Marlie and Rianne not been standing either side of him, wands at the ready. "Right now, this one's my priority."

"But why?" asked Harry. "What's he done?"

"Don't you know?" Deanna asked, eyebrows raised in mock surprise. "Did he not come in boasting of his little coup?"

Harry and Hermione shook their heads. "What little coup?"

Deanna turned back to Ron. "Going to tell them Weasley? Or am I?"

Ron opened his mouth to speak, but the words refused to come out. Instead, he just hung his head, staring at the ground in shame. "Sorry, Harry." were the only words that came out.

"Sorry?" asked Harry, now really confused. "What on earth for?"

"Tell them, Weasley." said Deanna. "Tell them or I will."

Ron gulped, tried to speak, but again, words failed him. He just shook his head, fighting the urge to cry, to prostrate himself before Deanna and beg for mercy.

Harry exchanged looks with Hermione. What was going on?

"Ron? What is it?" Hermione asked, trying to coax the information out of him.
"What's happened?"

"I'm sorry." Ron choked. "Really sorry. Hermione, I... I can't..." He turned to Deanna, tears beginning to well up. "I can't... don't make me..."

Deanna just sneered at him before turning to Rianne. "You want to do it?"

Rianne nodded once. "He got Lu expelled. Told Malfoy about her having Parseltongue and a few other things that made it look like she was causing the attacks. He told his father, and hey presto, she's gone."

Harry went very still as he heard this, trying to come to terms with this new revelation. Slowly, he turned to Ron, staring him straight in the eye.

"Is this true?"

Ron couldn't meet his gaze. He just stayed staring at the floor.

"Sorry, Harry." he mumbled. "I'm so sorry."

Harry took a step forward, suddenly looking for all the world like the warrior wizard he'd been predicted to be.

"Is... it... TRUE?" he yelled, moving his face right next to Ron's, the shock beginning to wear off. "Answer me!"

Ron nodded, swallowing back the tears. "Yes. Yes, it is. Harry, I'm sorry, please believe me, I thought she really was the Heir, I thought she'd cast some kind of bewitchment over you, I was wrong, I'm sorry, OW!"

Harry had reached back and delivered a sharp upper cut to Ron's jaw, sending him flying. A moment later and he was on him, raining blows on him left, right and centre.

"LIAR!" he was screaming at him. "You've had it in for everyone Slytherin all year, ever since Ginny got put there. You wanted revenge, didn't you? DIDN'T YOU? You wanted revenge pure and simple and you didn't care whether you were right or wrong or how many people you had to hurt in the process."

"Harry, please, I'm sorry!" Ron pleaded. "Don't hurt me, I didn't think, argh!"

"Too right you didn't think!" thundered Harry, hitting him sharply and repeatedly. "Or you'd have thought twice before stabbing me in the back wouldn't you?"

"Harry!" cried Hermione, alarmed at how violent this was getting. "Don't, you'll hurt him!" She tried to pull him off Ron, without success.

"That's the general idea." snarled Harry as he laid into Ron. Gathering round them, the crowd of watching students began to chant and shout encouragement, as Ron vainly tried to stop Harry punching the living daylights out of him.

The three Slytherins watched the little pantomime from a distance, having retreated once the fight had got underway.

"Well, I suppose it saved us a job." Rianne commented.

"Yeah, I'm not really the violent type." added Marlie. She noticed the looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her. "I'm not!" she protested. "Really!"

"It's true, you know." Deanna mused. "The most effective weapon is one that's so well honed, you don't even have to do anything. It goes to work all by itself."

"Harry, you'll get in trouble, let him go!" Hermione gasped, still trying to break the fight up. She glanced up, suddenly noticing how quiet the room had gone. All around her, students were either staring transfixed with horror, or turning away and slinking off murmuring variations on the words "oh shit". This wasn't a good sign. Turning around, she found herself coming face to face with absolutely the last person she wanted to see.

Professor Snape was standing on the stairs, watching them, eyebrow raised. Not far away, Hermione was vaguely aware of Rianne tugging Deanna's sleeve, and of all three Slytherins turning to see him, as seemingly mesmerised as she was. Slowly, oh so slowly, Snape began to descend.

Those slow, heavy footfalls were enough to penetrate even Harry's singleminded concentration. Feeling the same foreboding that had come over Hermione, he let Ron go and turned. And froze.

Ron, suddenly aware that he was no longer having to fend off blows from all sides, wondered what the problem was. He looked up. And realised that a situation that he'd thought couldn't possibly have got any worse just had. He was doomed. Officially, certainly, irrevocably doomed.

"Well, well, well." Snape's whispered tones shattered the silence. The tension broke, but only in the sense that impending doom was now certain doom. "Potter and Weasley, fighting in the corridor. By rights, I should have you both expelled. However. I'm curious. So tell me, Potter. Why are you assaulting Weasley? The truth now, boy. And make it good."

Harry didn't answer. All he could do was open and close his mouth, looking rather foolish, but too paralysed to do anything more sensible. Beside him, Hermione felt her heart sink. Harry and Ron were both on their last chance as it was, and if neither of them managed to provide Snape with a convincing reply, it looked like Luella wouldn't be the only one with a lot of parental explaining to do.

To everyone's surprise, it was Marlie Lovegood who saved the situation.

"Please sir." she whispered. "It wasn't Harry's fault. Don't blame him."

Snape turned to look at her, a look of icy contempt that seemed to say 'what would you possibly know about this, girl?' It was well known that relations between Marlie and Snape were considerably cooler than those with most other Slytherins.

"Not his fault he was brawling with another student in the corridor and, I might add, getting the upper hand? If you have a rational explanation for that one, Miss Lovegood, I for one would be most interested to hear it."

Rianne came to her friend's assistance. "It's true, sir. It was Deanna who started it, and when Harry found out why, he kinda took over from her."

Snape's scepticism dissolved as his eyes crossed over to Deanna. Now he really was curious.

"Deanna?" he asked sharply. "Miss Tyler, is this true?"

Deanna nodded, not troubling to hide anything. "Absolutely."

"I see." He regarded her rather sternly, but not without an element of alarm. "Would you mind telling me why?"

"It was him who told Malfoy about Lu." Deanna told him. Snape froze, and in that instant, a million and one emotions passed through his eyes. He turned back to the two boys.

"Is this true?" he asked, in that soft voice he always used just when he was at his most dangerous.

Ron didn't say anything. Fear had got the better of him and near catatonia was about the only thing anyone was likely to get out of him now. Harry, however, felt his confidence return. Maybe, just maybe, for once, Snape would actually take his side.

"It's true." he heard himself saying. "The slimy toerag got one of my friends expelled for something she didn't do. I'm not standing for that."

To his surprise, something almost like respect flickered in Snape's eyes.

"I see. An understandable response. However, I must remind you that fighting is strictly forbidden. Five points from Gryffindor. Now, Potter, if you wouldn't mind moving along? You're causing an obstruction."

Harry got up, shaking. Five points? Was that really all that was going to happen? He could scarcely believe it, but Snape didn't look too furious. Not with him anyway, although he wouldn't want to be in Ron's shoes right now. Indicating to Hermione to follow, he slipped away before Snape could change his mind.

Snape cast a look at the throng of students, the one guaranteed to make most of them have a sudden urge to go and do something very important somewhere far, far away.

"Well? Don't the rest of you have places to be?"

They weren't slow in taking the hint. Within minutes the crowd cleared and the room emptied. Hoping to slip away unnoticed in the chaos, Ron picked himself up and tagged after some Hufflepuff third years. Unfortunately, when you're taller than most of your classmates with bright red hair, it's not easy to look inconspicuous.

"Not you, Weasley." The words brought him to a halt like a rope around his neck, jerking him backwards to meet his doom. Hoping he wasn't sweating too much, Ron turned to face Snape's wrath.

"You're not going to hurt him too much, are you?" Marlie asked nervously.

"I?" Snape turned to Marlie, amused. "I'm not going to hurt him at all. Deanna!"

"Yes sir?" Deanna asked eagerly. She'd picked up on the emphasis on the I in that last phrase of Snape's and part of her was hoping that if Ron was going to get hurt, she could inflict some of it.

"You and Weasley come with me. There are things we need to discuss." He turned around and headed for the dungeons. Ron gulped and wished he had the courage to turn and run while he still could. However, Deanna and her friends all had their wands handy and would hex him before he'd gone a yard. No help for it now. Summoning all his resolve, he went off to meet his fate.

Hermione watched from the doorway, fearful of ever seeing Ron again, in one piece anyway. She turned to Harry.

"Do you think he'll be alright?"

Harry shrugged. "Who cares?"

"Harry, he's your friend." said Hermione, a little shocked at his harsh attitude.

"Was, Hermione." Harry corrected. "He *was* my friend."

"Harry..." Hermione tried to persuade him otherwise. Harry cut her off.

"Forget it, Hermione. Friends do not hurt their friends by betraying someone they care about."

"But he might have really thought she was the Heir, and wanted to get her away from you." said Hermione, still wanting to believe Ron had acted honourably.

Harry just laughed. "Mione, is it likely?"

Hermione hung her head. "No, probably not."

"Exactly. Anyway, she is the Heir." he said, lowering his voice.

Hermione's eyes widened. "But... you said she didn't do it."

"That's right."

"So, how can she be the Heir of... oh!" Hermione slapped her forehead. "Of course. She's the Second Heir, isn't she?"

Harry nodded.

"Which means..." Hermione stared at Harry in horror. "Oh god. What's he done?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. Don't know what'll happen now. But this I do know - with Lu gone, we're all in trouble."

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Ron followed Deanna and Snape in silence as they walked through dungeon corridors. Appropriate, really. After all, weren't the dungeons the traditional location for torturing and killing prisoners? No chance of anyone hearing anything down here, and there must be plenty of places for hiding a body. Would he ever see sunlight again? His family? His friends? Unlikely. Harry and Hermione probably didn't care what happened to him now. What with all the attacks recently, it wouldn't be too tricky to convince everyone he'd been the latest victim. He'd not forgotten the look in Snape's eyes, and Deanna would quite happily see him dead right now.

His fears were confirmed when Snape arrived at his office and told them to wait. He went in and re-emerged with a black bag marked with a pentagram, known in the magical world as a symbol of life and wholeness, and thus, healing. A mediwizard's bag. Ron really didn't like the look of this. Snape indicated for them to follow once more and began leading them on a path that appeared to lead into the depths of the dungeons, twisting and turning as it made its way into the depths of the castle. Finally, he arrived outside a particularly intimidating cell and showed them both in.

The torches were lit at a single word from Snape. Deanna took up a position opposite him, a cruel smile on her face.

Snape told Ron to stand against the wall and opened his bag. "Sensor Injurium." he murmured, scanning Ron with his wand. Nodding to himself, he drew a small phial of a rather murky looking dark green potion from his bag and presented it to him.

Ron shrank back. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Healing Potion." came the terse reply. "You're still carrying wounds from your fight with Potter. Drink up, boy, it won't kill you."

Ron took it dubiously, but drank it anyway. He pulled a face as the liquid hit his throat. It tasted absolutely foul. However, as he swallowed, the urge to be sick faded as a warm glow spread throughout his entire body, smoothing out aches and pains he hadn't known he had, healing wounds the adrenaline had stopped him noticing. Within seconds he felt on top of the world.

"Thank you." he whispered, handing back the phial. Snape just shrugged.

"I may not like you, but I'm not likely to send a wounded man into combat. Now. To business." He turned to Ron with a sharklike smile that mirrored Deanna's so closely it was uncanny. "Given that Luella was expelled by the governors exactly in line with procedure, there is no official punishment I can deal out for your actions. However, unless this whole business is laid to rest, there will be repercussions. Serious repercussions. Boy, are you familiar with the concept of wergild?"

Somehow, Ron didn't think it was money that turned into a wolf every full moon.
"Er... no."

"Then I shall explain. Under ancient law that Slytherin House still adheres to even now, if someone wrongs somebody, the victim or their kin are entitled to demand compensation. This is known as wergild, normally paid in the form of money or goods, the exact amount depending on the harm done."

"But I don't have any money." Ron whispered.

"I don't want your money." Deanna hissed. Snape merely sighed.

"You see my problem, Weasley. Deanna has no need of any more money, and doesn't want it anyway. Besides, you have none to give. However, there are... other ways of making amends."

"Such as?" Ron asked, not liking the way this was going.

"Well, if no wergild was forthcoming, tradition usually was to declare either a bloodfeud between the two families concerned, or a vendetta between the two individuals. However, Deanna's family are already involved with a bloodfeud with the Malfoys, and I'm sure she won't want to have two on her hands."

"Which just leaves...?" Ron really didn't want to hear the answer to this.

"A tradition known as indenturing, by which the perpetrator signed themselves over to their victim as a slave for a fixed term, during which they belonged to the victim entirely, body and soul, although the victim could not do anything more damaging than the original crime. Sometimes this was genuine slavery over a period of years, after which they returned home. At other times, it was for only a period of hours or less during which the victim exacted what retribution they wished, again, not exceeding the original damage."

It began to dawn on Ron just what Snape was getting at. "You're going to make me Deanna's slave?"

"For a time."

"I don't want a slave, I want blood!" Deanna snarled. "I want to finish what I started in the Hall."

"And so you shall, my dear." purred Snape. "What I propose is this. For a short period of, say, ten minutes, I shall leave you two alone in here. During that time, Deanna is permitted to do whatever she wishes to you in revenge. After that, I shall return, carry out whatever healing is necessary and send you both on your way, grievance dealt with. Is this acceptable?"

Deanna nodded, smiling once more. "I like it. When do I start?"

"Patience, dear child." Snape soothed her. "There are certain formalities. There are rules after all. Well, Weasley? Do you agree to this?"

"What happens if I don't?" Ron whispered, his throat dry.

"In that case, I send you both away now. But Deanna's anger will be left festering, and it will slowly change into hate and loathing. You'll have to deal with knowing she hates and despises you, and that one day, that will come home to roost, in a time, place and manner of her choosing. Whereas if you choose this way, you have a few minutes of pain, but her anger will be sated. Of course, she'll still despise you, but at least you'll be able to sleep at night and won't have to worry about what she might be planning."

Ron closed his eyes, remembering Deanna's murderous rage of earlier. She was Slytherin too, gods only knew what she might plan. Snape had a point, maybe it was best to get it over with now.

"Alright." he whispered. "I submit."

"Very good, Weasley." said Snape in approval. "You do have some sense after all. Now the formalities. Your wands please." He held out his hand.

"Oh, don't I get to use magic?" Deanna pouted.

"I think physical violence is quite enough, besides it has a certain satisfying primacy about it that magic does not. Anyway, magic can be detected."

"Suppose." Deanna shrugged and handed her wand over. Snape turned to Ron.

"Well?"

Ron looked at his wand. Spellotaped together, still sputtering the odd spark, unicorn hair poking out of the end, splinters dropping out of the middle where it had nearly broken in two. He was loath to hand it over, but on the other hand it would probably do him more harm than good in close quarters. Despite himself, he handed it over.

Snape took it with a sneer. "Really Weasley, is this the best you can manage? Maybe we've located the source of your insecurities. Wand envy is a terrible thing, boy."

Without waiting for a reply, he moved on to the formal declarations. "Do you, Ronald Arthur Weasley, admit that by passing certain information that should have been kept quiet to a sworn enemy, you have intentionally caused the wrongful expulsion of one Luella Angelica Martin?"

"Yes, but..." Ron started. Snape cut him off.

"That will do. Deanna Melissa Tyler, do you agree to stand as champion on Luella Angelica Martin's behalf, as her sworn sister-in-spirit and ally?"

"I do."

"Good, good. And do you, Ronald Arthur Weasley, agree to submit yourself to Deanna Melissa Tyler for the next ten minutes for purposes of exacting blood instead of wergild?"

Ron really didn't like the sound of this at all. "Blood? That wasn't in the deal!"

Snape gave an exasperated sigh. "It's metaphorical, boy, although if you agree to allow Deanna to physically attack you, you must expect some blood loss at some point. Do you agree?"

"I... well..." Ron hesitated. Now it came to it, he really didn't want to do this. But on the other hand, there was the thought of Deanna haunting him for years to come, sharpening a sword and looking for revenge. "OK. I'll do it."

"Thank you. Deanna Melissa Tyler, as Luella Angelica Martin is not dead, do you accept that you have only the right to hurt, not to maim or kill?"

Deanna sighed. "Yes, alright." she said, somewhat reluctantly.

"Excellent. Furthermore, as Luella Angelica Martin is healthy in body if not spirit, do you accept that you may not cause any permanent damage, or any damage that may not be healed by a mediwizard's skill?"

"Yes, yes." sighed Deanna, getting rather impatient. "Can we get on with it, please?"

"In a moment. Now." Snape waved his wand and an hourglass appeared, hovering in mid air. "When the sand starts flowing, you may begin. When it stops, you must stop. Weasley, you are committed to remaining for the full time. I remind you of your agreement to submit, and that you may not retaliate or raise a hand in your defence. Deanna, if you wish to stop before the time is up, you may do so. I remind you of your vow to cause no permanent damage." He reached out and tapped the hourglass. The sand started to flow. "I shall be outside. Begin." With that, he slipped out of the door, the lock clicking shut behind him.

Deanna turned to Ron, gloating. "Well now, Weasley. Shall we begin?"

He never got the chance to answer. She was on him straight away, hands round his throat, forcing him back against the wall.

"No permanent damage, no killing or maiming, nothing that can't be healed." she sneered at him, tightening her grip. "We'll see about that."

Ron tried to answer, but no words came out, just a horrible choking sound. He felt the room starting to spin as it went black at the edges. If she went on like this, he'd lose consciousness. He began to wonder if Deanna really was strong enough to throttle him.

He never did find out. Just as the room went completely black, she let him go. He fell to the ground, nursing his windpipe. She took the opportunity to give him a good kick to the jaw, sending him sprawling.

"You think that Lu'll ever heal? Do you?" she was snarling at him as she moved in. "Unless she somehow manages to clear her name and gets reinstated, the damage will be permanent. She'll always have the fear of getting found out, the fear that the dark witch tag will remain, that she doesn't deserve her power. You bastard, Weasley!" She hit him again.

"Sorry..." Ron whispered. "I'm sorry."

"You will be." Deanna responded as she struck him once more. "Oh, you will be." She dragged him to his feet, only to knee him in the groin, punch him in the stomach and while he was doubled up from the pain, elbowed him in the back, forcing him to his knees.

"Let's hear it Ron." Deanna laughed. "Let's hear it then. You're sorry, aren't you?"

"Yes." gasped Ron.

"You were wrong to even think about getting rid of Lu."

"Yes. Deanna, please..." he begged.

"Shut it." she snapped, dealing him a backhander to the face. One of her gothic rings caught his cheek, slashing it open to leave a trail of blood. "You talk when I ask you something. Other than that, you keep your mouth shut. Got that?"

Ron nodded.

"Good. Now. You were very wrong to go to Malfoy. Very, very wrong. Isn't that right?"

"Yes." Ron whispered, feeling tears come to his eyes.

"And what does that make you, Weasley?"

Ron paused. There were many answers, but he knew better than to think any of them would appease her. Nevertheless, he could but try.

"A lying, traitorous bastard?" he volunteered.

"Correct, Weasel. One hundred per cent accurate." On the last word, she lifted her leg and swung her foot round to connect with the side of his face. He fell to the floor, the wind knocked out of him. Not to mention the fact that a Doc Marten boot in the face is not a particularly pleasant experience. One of the eyelets in the side had given him another cut to match the first, and he could tell he'd lost a couple of layers of skin there.

She was on him again almost immediately, grabbing his arm and pinning it behind his back. He screamed in pain as she wrenched it almost out of the socket, forcing his elbow into a position nature had never intended.

With her other hand, she grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head back.

"I'm not going to kill you, Weasley." she whispered. "I'm just going to make you wish I was!" She began repeatedly slamming his head into the unforgiving stone floor. In vain, Ron tried to turn his head, but Deanna was having none of it. He went nose first into the paving slabs, and felt it break on impact, drenching him in blood.

Deanna didn't let a little detail like that bother her. She kept on slamming his head on to the floor until he was nearly unconscious, before letting go and sliding off him, using his pinioned right arm to flip him over. Ron cried out as he felt his shoulder really dislocate this time. With the one eye that hadn't swollen up so badly he couldn't see out of it, he looked up at the almost unrecognisable demented fury that was Deanna Tyler, trying to plead for mercy.

He didn't get it. She was on her feet now, kicking him in the abdomen for all she was worth. At first, the kicks came fast and furious, but after a bit, Ron was aware that they were slowing down. Was she tiring finally, or was he just imagining it? Maybe the pain and increasing lightheadedness were causing him to lose all sense of time.

But no. Deanna really was slowing down. With a couple of desultory kicks to finish off, she finally came to a halt and stood back, breathing heavily and shaking.

"No fun if they don't fight back." he heard her say quietly. "Besides, you're hardly worth the bother." He heard her turn and walk out, hammering the door and calling to

Snape to let her out. The door clicked open and he heard Snape saying with surprise "You're finished early, child. Not even five minutes gone yet."

Ron rolled over, wincing as his ribs made contact with the floor and tried to focus on the sandtimer. To his surprise, it was only just under half full.

"I just didn't see the point in continuing." he heard Deanna answer. "It won't bring Lu back, and there's no satisfaction if he's going along with it. It's like kicking a puppy."

Snape nodded, smiling in satisfaction. "Lesson learned well, child. Revenge has its limitations. Do you still want him hung, drawn and quartered?"

Deanna looked back at him. "Not really. Couldn't care less any more, to be honest."

Snape's smile broadened. "It worked then. Go on, child, be off with you. Get yourself cleaned up. I'll tie things up here."

"OK then." Deanna responded, suddenly sounding completely exhausted. "See you, sir." She left the room.

Snape bade her farewell before approaching Ron, bag in hand.

"Well now, let's see what Caitlin Tyler's child has done to you then." He shook his head as he looked at Ron's face. "She didn't pull her punches, did she?" He pulled out his wand and cast the Sensor Injurium spell again. "Oh dear. One black eye, two rather nasty cuts, much superficial skin damage, a broken nose, broken jaw, dislocated jaw too, rather a lot of blood loss, concussion and a hairline fracture in the skull. And that's just the head." He allowed the wand to travel lower. "Hmm. Cracked ribs, bruising, dislocated shoulder, ligament damage to the elbow, and I think you have a ruptured spleen there too. Interesting, but I think I can deal with this."

Reaching for his wand again, he began to heal the surface damage first, before rummaging around in his bag for another potion.

"Extra Strength Healing Potion. Sit up, boy." With a gesture that was surprisingly tender, he lifted Ron into a sitting position, before helping him swallow the contents of the phial.

This potion tasted even worse than the other one had. Ron shuddered, pulled a face and choked repeatedly, desperately wanting to vomit the foul thing up. However, it stayed down. Then the warm feeling in his stomach began, except this time it swiftly turned into a roaring furnace that seemed to set his very blood on fire, coursing throughout his body, seeming to set it alight.

"It's burning, it's burning me!" Ron howled.

"Of course it's burning you, boy, it's the Extra Strength version." Snape snapped at him. "Hold still and take it, it doesn't last long."

Ron moaned and curled up, trying to stop the pain. Slowly, he felt the fire burn itself out, as his temperature dropped to normal, leaving him covered in sweat and trembling. However, he no longer felt lightheaded and the pain was gone. His shoulder was just fine, if a little stiff, the aches and pains in his muscles were gone, his stomach no longer hurt, and his face felt as if nothing had ever happened to it. Tentatively, he rubbed his nose and jaw. They were still covered in blood, but otherwise were fine.

"Thank you." he whispered.

Snape shrugged. "I could hardly send you back to class in that state." He conjured up a towel, flannel and a bowl of hot water. "Clean yourself up, then I've got a few other potions for you."

Ron did as he was told, sponging the blood off his face and hands, noticing his reflection in the water and being relieved to see that he looked normal again. After drying himself off, he turned back to Snape who had some more potions ready.

"This one will replace the nutrients lost by all the bleeding. This will encourage the production of more red blood cells. This is not a potion but a salve for any remaining muscle aches. And now..." He brandished his wand again and a black Hogwarts cloak appeared in his hand. Ron took it and realised with a start that it was his own.

"My cloak!" he gasped. Snape tutted irritably.

"I'm hardly likely to teleport someone else's, am I?" he snapped. "Put it on, you need to keep warm. What lesson do you have next?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts." Ron replied with a grimace.

"I see. Very well, I will send your apologies to Professor Lockhart. In the mean time, you will go back to your common room, have a hot bath, get changed into some clean clothes, and spend the afternoon resting and staying warm. You will have an uncomfortable afternoon, but you will be fine by dinnertime. Drink your potions, boy, I need the phials back."

Ron did as he was told, grimacing each time, although they weren't that bad, not really. Snape took the little bottles back, before reaching into his robes.

"I almost forgot. Your wand." He held it out with a sneer. Ron took it off him, but paused before he got up to leave.

"Sir, why'd you do all this?" he blurted out. "Why not just give me a detention like normal."

Snape hesitated before turning to him. "You heard Deanna as she left?"

"Yes."

"You heard her she say no longer feels angry at you?"

"Yes." said Ron, still a little wary.

"You see my point." Snape gestured. "Better some blood shed now than a bloodfeud later, as we Slytherins like to say. I can heal most injuries, but I can't stop a war. This way, Deanna's got it all out of her system, and you're properly chastened. A good outcome all round." His expression hardened. "Now get out of my sight."

Ron didn't wait to be told twice. Pausing only to pick up his bag, he ran out of the dungeon as fast he could go, back to the common room and a semblance of normality.

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Chapter Twenty Three Aftermath and Redemption

Luella, meanwhile, wasn't having much more fun than Ron had been. She'd spent most of the eight hour journey bored out of her skull, playing with Sooty, reading, or just staring out of the window, wondering what on earth the future held, and what everyone was doing at Hogwarts without her. Of course, had she known that her friends had spent most of the time beating Ron up and walking out on Lockhart, she'd have been torn between being touched that they'd done all that just for her sake, and horrified at the level of violence. But as it was, she was unaware of all that and likely to remain so. Because as the train pulled into King's Cross, she had more pressing problems on her hands.

Such as the fact that it was cold, she was hungry, had no money other than a few Galleons, the sun had set long ago, and it had just begun to really hit home that she wouldn't be back at Hogwarts again for some time and her friends were far, far away. That, and her magic was gone. Well, not gone exactly. But out of reach. Suppressing a lump in her throat, she pulled on her cloak and surveyed her trunk, wondering just how she was supposed to get this thing off the train on her own.

She tried pulling it. It moved a little. But not very far, and already her muscles were aching. Swearing under her breath, she tried again. No better. This was no use. She'd never get the thing off the train at this rate, never mind home. And if she couldn't even get her stuff home, how the hell was she going to cope with the rest of her life? Sinking into a chair, she began to cry.

And stopped as she heard a woman's voice whisper the words "*Wingardium Leviosa!*", saw magic flash out, and her trunk rise a foot in the air. Gasping in amazement, she turned to see a familiar figure in the doorway, blue robes glimmering in the half-light.

"Caitlin!" she cried, running to her and flinging her arms around the older witch in a way she'd not done with her own mother for a very long time. Caitlin smiled and took Luella in her arms.

"Hello, love. Thought I'd better come on board and find you - I was wondering if you might need help."

Luella nodded. "Thanks." she whispered. "Oh, Caitlin, what am I going to do?"

"First things first." Caitlin told her. "You're coming back to my place, you're going to settle in, we're going to get something to eat, and hopefully then, Severus'll arrive and we can decide what we're going to do next."

Luella dried her eyes. "OK." she whispered. "How do we get there?"

"There's a Ministry car waiting outside. I've requisitioned it on classified DDAE business." Caitlin grinned.

"Is that allowed?" asked Luella in surprise.

"Probably not, but no one else wants it and when you've got my security clearance level, no one argues." Caitlin shrugged. "Come on, let's get out of here." Taking Luella by the hand, she led her out.

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The journey home didn't take long. The Ministry car slid through what remained of the evening rush as if the traffic didn't exist, and by eight o'clock, just one hour after leaving King's Cross, they were back at the Tylers.

Back, but not home and dry just yet, it seemed. Luella couldn't help noticing that there was a light on in the small house.

"Caitlin," she began, "did you leave the lights turned on?"

"No," said Caitlin, already producing her wand. "I didn't. Wait here, and *don't* leave the car until I come back for you." She turned to the driver. "If I don't return, or something happens, take Luella to DDAE HQ and contact Melissa Lovegood immediately. The light in the front room flashing three times is an all's well signal. Blue flares out of the chimney is a distress signal. I shall be back as soon as I can." With that she left the car, cast a Glamour about herself and slipped into the house.

First indications were good. No voices, so the intruder was either alone or working with a deaf-mute. She also noted that it was the kitchen light that had been turned on. And coming from the open door, the intoxicating scent of honey mixed with herbs and fried chicken. Nice. Very nice. Caitlin realised with a groan that she'd not eaten for seven hours. Stop it, Tyler, she scolded herself. Don't let your stomach get the better of you now. Wand at the ready, she edged into the room.

It was the scent of food that saved the intruder's life. Had Caitlin not been so tempted, he'd have been dead or at least beyond caring within moments. As it was, Caitlin decided to ask questions first for once.

He was bending down, going through her cupboards, partially obscured by the kitchen table. Nevertheless, the black-robed figure was visible enough for Caitlin to get a good shot in. Raising her wand, she stepped forward.

"Hold it right there, stranger. DDAE. Make one false move and we won't need to bother with Azkaban."

The intruder stopped what he was doing and looked up, very slowly. Caitlin put the wand down immediately.

"Severus?" she gasped. "Do you mind telling me just what you think you're doing?"

Severus got to his feet, apparently unbothered, although there was an edge of anxiety in his eyes. However, his voice didn't show it.

"Cooking." he replied. "I thought you and Luella could do with a good meal. Don't act so surprised, I did tell you I'd be coming round."

"It's generally considered common courtesy to wait to be admitted when visiting another's house." Caitlin shot back at him, furious at his invasion of privacy, but more furious still that she'd been so keyed up over nothing. Only now did she realise how fast her heart was beating and how much she was shaking. However, curiosity got the better of her and she didn't remain angry for long. "How did you get in anyway?"

"Placed my left palm on the sign and recited my maternal lineage." Severus responded. "Ancient Tal-y-Rhys magic, don't you know. Any clan member can use it to gain an audience with the Lady of Tal-y-Rhys."

Caitlin winced to hear the clan-mother's title spoken out loud. It might well be hers now, but that didn't mean it sat comfortably on her shoulders. "Don't call me that!" she whispered. "It's my mother's title, not mine."

"Your mother's dead, Caitlin." Severus told her coldly. "You're the Lady now."

"Lady?" laughed Caitlin bitterly. "Of what?" She sank into a chair, her mother's memory still able to hurt her, despite the twelve year distance. Time meant nothing with wounds that deep. And more than Medea Tyler had died that night - most of the Tal-y-Rhys heritage had been wiped out too. "A house that's in ruins and a clan that can be numbered on the fingers of one hand! Deanna, Luella, Arabella Figg, Penelope Clearwater, and you. Some inheritance."

"Nevertheless, it's enough." Severus said as he approached. Although he still looked stern, there was an element of tenderness in his manner which left her touched. It was more than she'd expected. "You are still head of the family, I'm still a loyal Son of the Tal-y-Rhys, and Luella needs us both." He hesitated for the briefest of instants before taking her hand and squeezing it. "Consider me at your service."

Caitlin smiled and returned the gesture. "Thank you." she whispered. Although she was under no illusions that any other reason than duty and care for Luella brought him here, she was glad of the support. Maybe there was hope yet. And she couldn't deny she was pleased to see him again. She glanced at the pans on the oven.

"So what's for dinner?"

"Chicken coated in honey and mustard sauce. With mashed potatoes and assorted vegetables. To your taste?"

"Sounds wonderful." Caitlin breathed. "You know, you didn't have to go to all this trouble, I could have fed Luella."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think the poor girl's suffered enough?" He looked up. "Talking of Luella, where is she? You did remember to collect her, didn't you?"

"Of course I did, she's in the car."

"Good." Severus returned to his cooking. "Better go and get her then. This evening's going to be long enough as it is."

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Luella followed Caitlin inside, profoundly relieved that it was only Severus who'd invaded the Tyler house. Marauding dark mages were the last thing she needed right now.

He greeted her in a surprisingly gentle manner, gentle for him anyway, producing a cup of hot chocolate that seemed almost made to order.

"Four spoonfuls of cocoa, two-thirds boiling water, one third cold, stir it well, then cream and grated chocolate to top it with." he told her as he offered her the steaming mug, a Pigeon Street one belonging to Deanna that she claimed never to use any more, although Luella suspected otherwise. "A secret family recipe, known to only a few. Most people make the mistake of filling it up with boiling water, which destroys the taste and renders it undrinkable. What do you think?"

"Lovely!" whispered Luella. "Smells really chocolatey too."

"Good, that's how it should be." Severus smiled. "I find it has a comforting effect second to none. Better than any potion, don't you agree Caitlin? Caitlin?"

Caitlin didn't answer. She was staring at Luella's hot chocolate, mesmerised.

"Chocolate..." she hissed, almost salivating with desire.

"Oh good grief." sighed Severus. "Alright Caitlin, do you want some as well?"

She nodded.

"Alright then." Before long, another mug, a Che Guevara one this time that definitely didn't belong to Deanna, was being presented to the near-catatonic Caitlin, who grasped it with both hands, savouring it with delight.

"So easily pleased." Severus commented. "Whoever said women are complex and mysterious creatures? Just give them lots of chocolate, red wine, massages and

compliments, and agree with everything they say. It's simple. I can't believe how many men have problems with it."

"They do?" Luella asked, curious.

"Oh yes." Severus nodded. "So many men, usually Gryffindors, I might add, seem to have immense problems understanding women and their needs. They seem to think they're some kind of separate species. Although, looking at some of these men, maybe they have a point. However, I digress. Caitlin, how about dinner?"

"Yes please." whispered Caitlin, her chocolate cravings now perfectly satisfied.

"Very well then. Dinner is served."

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The meal proved to be as special as the drinks. Luella didn't know how he'd done it, but every drop of flavour, every nuance of texture had been expertly blended and brought out to create a taste sensation. Clearly all that Potions expertise had other beneficial side-effects. Luella wished he'd come and visit every night for that reason alone. She could get used to eating like this.

They didn't talk much. When the food was that good, you didn't, and besides, Luella was used to eating with Deanna, who regarded meals as a sacrosanct time not to be interrupted by anything so petty as conversation. So it was that nothing more was said until after they'd all finished.

Caitlin was first to speak.

"Severus," she sighed, "forget our past differences. Forget everything that's ever happened between us. I'll marry you now if you promise to cook like that every evening."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Is it really that easy? Caitlin, you are such a slut sometimes."

"I may be." Caitlin purred, shaking her hair back. "But at least I'm a slut with *standards*."

He shook his head. "She's terrible. Luella, I'm beginning to wonder if it's safe to leave you alone with this brazen hussy. Are you sure you won't be corrupted?"

Luella just smiled. "She's no worse than Marls."

Caitlin dissolved into giggles. "Mel's going to love that! Her daughter's turned out worse than me."

"Don't I know it." muttered Severus. "Every lesson I spend with my nerves on edge, wondering what's she's going to get wrong this week. Or worse, what her and

Weasley are planning. It's like dealing with a Slytherin version of the worst aspects of Neville Longbottom and Fred Weasley."

"Now, now, Severus, it can't be that bad." Caitlin soothed him. "She's quite bright after all, and she's not *always* in trouble, is she?"

"No, but only because she manages to cover her tracks so well." said Severus darkly.
"Who knows what she gets up to that no one's found out about yet?"

At this Luella immediately looked away, gazing innocently at the ceiling. Now was probably not the time to draw attention to herself. She noticed Severus watching her rather shrewdly, but didn't react.

Seeing that Luella was giving nothing away, Severus changed the subject. "Anyway, Miss Lovegood is, fortunately, far, far away right now. Can we get back to the matter in hand? Namely, Luella here."

Caitlin's mirth disappeared. "Right. Yes. Luella." There was an awkward silence. "So, er, what do you suggest?"

Severus drew his wand and banished the dishes to the sink. "I don't know, I was hoping you'd have thought of something."

"Oh gods, Severus." sighed Caitlin. "I've had a very trying day, as have we all, and I'm wiped out. How about we just all chill for a bit and see what happens? Luella?"

"Sounds good to me." Luella yawned, realising how tired she was. "How about we go to the living room?"

She regretted it as soon as she'd said it. Both Caitlin and Severus froze, the tension between them, so easily hidden thus far, now alive and unconcealable.

"I'd much rather stay here, the living room's a tip..." Caitlin began, but was cut off by Severus saying "Alright then, if that's what you want, I don't mind."

"We don't have to, I'm quite happy right here." said Caitlin, fidgeting uncharacteristically anxiously.

"I've got no problem with the living room." Severus announced, sounding rather more harsh than the occasion warranted. "If that's what Luella wants, that's what we'll do."

"Severus, are you sure...?" Caitlin asked, concerned.

"I'm sure." he cut her off.

Luella looked from one to the other, beginning to panic. Damn it, that must have been where their little fight happened. No wonder Caitlin didn't want Severus to go there. And no wonder Severus was even now defiantly insisting on it. She began to wish she'd kept her mouth shut.

She looked at Caitlin, hoping for support. No chance - Caitlin looked as fearful as she did. She turned to Severus, who seemed set on revisiting the scene. Maybe he wanted to exorcise a few demons. Well, why not? Might do him good.

She got to her feet. "Shall we make a move then? I don't know about you, but I really fancy a comfy seat."

Caitlin appeared resigned to fate as she got to her feet. "Alright then. Let's go."

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Luella followed Caitlin down the hallway with mounting trepidation. This could go any number of ways, and most of them were not pleasant. She was aware of Severus behind her, his breathing coming in ever faster intervals and his footsteps ever so slightly slowing down. Despite his outward firmness, he was worried.

Caitlin hesitated at the doorway. Seemed she needed a few seconds to compose herself too. This really wasn't a good sign, the adults being as emotionally vulnerable as she was. Fortunately, Aurors didn't get ahead by letting fear control them, and Caitlin stepped easily into the room, pausing only to light the fire before sliding gracefully onto the sofa, pulling off her boots and putting her feet up on the coffee table.

Luella felt some of her worries subside. Caitlin would be OK, anyway. But would he?

She watched Severus approach the door in his turn, trembling, and pale even by his standards. He closed his eyes, holding the doorjamb for support, still breathing in that awful, laboured way.

Concerned, Luella approached. He looked truly awful, like he was going to faint. Was he going to make it as far as one of the chairs? Why are men so stubborn, she thought to herself as she turned on the Glamoury.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Sir?"

"What?" he snarled, clearly struggling with whatever he was feeling.

"Look at me."

Something in her voice made him obey. He opened his eyes and looked at her. And in that moment of vulnerability, fell into the usual Glamoury trance, his normal resistance down.

"You're safe." she said, ever so softly. "No harm will come to you here. Morgan's Heir has you under her protection. Have no fear - the Lady will not strike tonight."

She released him and watched as he blinked and looked at her, a piercing look that caused her to turn away, now rather embarrassed at herself. However, he didn't seem angry.

"You never cease to amaze me, young Redeemer." Turning back to the doorway, still uneasy, but not nearly as anxious as he had been, he steeled himself and walked in, settling into the chair nearest the door. Once sitting down, he seemed to relax, although Luella noticed he studiously avoided looking at the part of the room near the fire, nor did he look directly at Caitlin. Still, he was much improved, and Luella, relieved, settled down next to Caitlin, who was looking at the ground with a mixture of sadness and resignation.

"It will take more than Glamoury to heal wounds so deep." Caitlin said quietly, so quietly Luella could barely hear her. "But nevertheless, you did well." A pause. "Thank you."

Luella wasn't sure how to react to that. Part of her felt like snapping back that if Caitlin hadn't lost it in the first place, she wouldn't have needed to do anything. And yet, the sadness in Caitlin's whole demeanour held her back. Caitlin too had been wounded. Punishing her wouldn't solve anything.

"Erm... cheers." Luella shifted uncomfortably. "So now what?"

"Now we start planning your future." came the reply from Severus. "We'll need to continue your lessons here. Caitlin, is this place safe from prying eyes? In particular, Ministry eyes."

"Of course it is." said Caitlin. "What Tal-y-Rhys magic can't conceal, a word from the DDAE can. Trust me, no one ever pries here."

"Good. So when Luella starts practising charms and transfiguration, plus whatever obscure Dark Arts and anti-Dark Arts you plan to teach her, it won't set off every alarm at the Improper Use of Magic Office."

"Hardly." smiled Caitlin thinly.

"I'm going to be learning Dark Arts?" Luella whispered, her mind boggling.

"Not exactly." Caitlin told her. "Not the extreme stuff anyway. But you can certainly expect to be learning things that aren't on the Hogwarts curriculum."

"With Lockhart teaching, that doesn't narrow it down a lot." Severus remarked. "You'll be spending the first two months catching up on everything you would have done this year had you had a competent teacher."

Both Luella and Caitlin laughed at this. Until a thought struck Luella.

"But... I don't have a wand any more." she began. "How will I be able to practice magic?"

"A very good point." said Severus. "Caitlin, where can we get a wand with no questions asked? Is there a strong black market in wands for banished mages?"

"Not here, although America's got a wand shop on every corner." Caitlin sniffed.
"Honestly, bloody Yanks and their fanatical insistence on no wand control restrictions.
If they actually had anything resembling a state over there, they'd have the right to
bear a wand right up there with the free speech. Do you realise they've got this
National Wand Association encouraging kids as young as three to use wands?"

"I can believe it." Severus replied. "It's one mixed-up country and no mistake. They let you have a wand as soon as you're old enough to hold one, and yet don't let you drink until you're halfway to middle-age because they don't think the young are responsible enough to handle it." He shrugged. "A very strange people, Americans. Very outspoken, forthright and passionate... about all the wrong things."

"But can they get me a wand?" asked Luella, ignoring the less-than-flattering commentary.

"Probably." replied Caitlin. "But that may not be necessary."

Both Severus and Luella sat bolt upright at this, Severus forgetting that he was meant to be traumatised and staring right at her.

"Not necessary?" he demanded, his gaze hardening. "Why on earth not? Caitlin, what have you got up your sleeve now?"

Caitlin didn't answer straight away. A strange, far away look entered her eyes. When she did speak, it was in a very slow, deliberate voice.

"Not up my sleeve. But in this house, there is more than one Tyler wand."

"What, another one?" Luella asked, bewildered. "Whose?"

Caitlin got to her feet, and walked slowly towards the fireplace, her hands beginning to shake. Nevertheless, she seemed strangely composed.

"Twelve years ago, this came into my possession, along with all the other family heirlooms." she whispered. "Of them all, this was the one I least wished to have, and by all rights, the one I shouldn't have. And yet I held on to it. All this time, I've held on to it. All because the damned thing wouldn't break when it was meant to..." Her composure snapped and she let out a sob, her voice breaking. Luella looked away, guilty at making Caitlin go through what was obviously painful for her. And yet, she was desperately curious to know whose wand it was, and why Caitlin hadn't wanted to take it into her possession.

Severus also seemed to be wrestling with himself. He was watching Caitlin in pain, clutching the arms of his chair, clearly unable to bear seeing her like that, and yet unwilling to go to her, unwilling to go any nearer the fireplace than he had to. Tearing his eyes away, he came face to face with Luella's own anguished gaze.

"Why is she so upset?" Luella whispered. "Whose wand was it?"

"One who shouldn't have died." Severus said softly. "At least, if it's who I think it is." He hesitated. "Luella, help me, I hate seeing her cry..."

Luella nodded, guessing what he needed from her. Taking a deep breath, she switched on the Glamour again. "Go to her." she whispered. "I will protect you."

It worked. Severus slipped into trance, before snapping decisively out of it, this time looking far more determined. Steeling himself, he got to his feet and strode over to her, wincing with every step but not turning back. Standing behind her, he gripped her shoulders with his fingertips, seemingly afraid to touch her too closely, but wanting to comfort her regardless.

"Ssh, don't cry." he whispered to her. "It's alright, we're both here, Luella and I. You'll be fine."

"It shouldn't be here." Caitlin wept, rubbing her eyes. "I should have buried it with her, like I did with Lil's and James's, should have snapped it in two like we're meant to, so she could have it in the underworld. It's one of the most important duties the next of kin can perform, and I couldn't do it. Damn thing refused to break..." She began to weep again. Severus said nothing, although he gripped her shoulders harder and moved that bit closer. Caitlin reached for his hand and squeezed it in a simple gesture of thanks. The two of them remained like that for a while, before Caitlin pulled herself together, dried her eyes and turned around. Severus let her go and stepped back. Caitlin smiled at him, with a little flash of Glamour of her own.

"Thanks." she whispered, before pulling another Glamour over herself, one that made her look as if she'd not cried at all. She turned to Luella. "Lu, honey, come here. It shouldn't be here, but it is, and these things happen for a reason. Wands aren't that difficult to break, as you yourself well know, and maybe this one had a reason for not breaking. Whatever, it's here, and it seems rather appropriate that you have it. Come." She beckoned Luella over. Luella approached the fireplace, her heart racing. A new wand, and not just any wand, but a Tal-y-Rhys heirloom? She could scarcely believe it. And yet, Caitlin was even now running her wand along the mantelpiece, reaching for a certain panel, pressing the top left corner and reaching into the gap that had just opened up. Luella watched in amazement as Caitlin produced a long, thin wooden box, inlaid with ivory, and covered with bizarre drawings of elephants, giraffes, lions, and other African animals.

Caitlin cradled it, smiling tenderly. "My mother loved Africa. She spent five years travelling around it after she left Hogwarts. Learnt all sorts of magic out there from some of the best witchdoctors around. Egyptian, Zulu, Afrikaan, Bantu, Arab, every ethnic group in Africa, you could guarantee she'd know some of their secrets. You should have seen Tal-y-Rhys Manor, kid, it was full of all the souvenirs she'd picked up on her travels. Most other kids had toy rabbits and bears in their rooms. I ended up with a real stuffed crocodile, and a real stuffed gorilla, and a real stuffed lion, all miniaturised. Still, I wouldn't have changed anything for the world." She looked up at Luella. "As you may have guessed by now, this is my mother's wand. She died in 1981, murdered by Voldemort while trying to work on some kind of magic that would have defeated him. I don't know if she completed the spell - my intuition tells me not, or there'd be no Voldemort left. African magic does not pull its punches. However, I

think it may have done enough even half-finished. And that magic was the last act this wand performed." She lifted the lid, no longer weeping, now the proud Tal-y-Rhys showing off her mother's skills. "Look, Luella. No Ollivander effort, this! Her original wand was lost while exploring an ancient jungle temple - I think she dropped it while doing a commando roll under this slab of rock that was threatening to block her escape route. So she made herself another one using the materials to hand. Nine inches long, ebony, contains lion sinew. I think she killed the lion herself."

"Good gods, Caitlin, you never told me your mother was the Slytherin James Bond." commented Severus dryly.

"She was not the Slytherin James Bond." Caitlin responded, irritated at the interruption of her monologue. "I am. She was Indiana Jones. Now, if we can get back to the subject in hand...?" She returned her attention to a fascinated Luella. "The custom is that when a mage dies, their wand is snapped in two and buried with them. I did that for Harry's parents, but when I came to do the same for mine, it refused to break. I don't know what my mother did to it, but she'd obviously had problems with wands breaking when they shouldn't."

Severus tutted in mock sympathy. "Dear oh dear. Wands aren't what they used to be, are they? Honestly, all she did was wrestle live crocodiles, avoid booby traps in ancient temples, get into fights with tribesfolk whose customs she'd broken or whose idols she'd nicked, end up duelling witchdoctors, and hunt down ferocious beasts with nothing but her bare hands. Who'd have thought a wand couldn't handle a few simple jobs like that?"

"Severus, shut up." Caitlin snapped at him. "As I was saying," here she shot him a look that could have killed, "she'd made this wand to last, and nothing I could do was going to break it. So I kept it and buried her without it, hoping that someone who'd faced the wilds of Africa on her own could deal with whatever the underworld had to offer. And now I'm giving it to you. Here. Take it. It's yours now."

She held the box towards Luella, unwrapping the folds of silk that concealed its contents. Luella peered in, eager to get a glimpse of this wand.

It was jet black, gleaming in the firelight, sanded down to an impossible smoothness which meant it hardly looked wooden at all, but some sleek, inhuman thing with a mind of its own. Indeed, the strongest impression that Luella got from it was a sense that there was some kind of primitive intelligence in this wand, that it was no inert piece of wood, but in its own way, curiously alive, although not malevolent. Intrigued, she reached out and took it.

And nearly dropped it in shock. A jolt of raw power ran through her as her fingers curled around it, followed by a sense of recognition and a feeling of having come home. With a shock, she realised that this was the wand itself feeling like this, that the wave of exultation now rising within her was no less than the wand rejoicing at finding an owner once more. Gazing at it in adoration, she lifted it high, watching the firelight reflecting in the blackness. Mine, she thought. You were meant to be mine from the start, Medea Tyler's legacy to the Second Heir. Experimentally, she waved it.

A ball of blue fire shot out of the end and hit Caitlin's bookshelf, setting it on fire. Caitlin shrieked and raced over to it, dowsing it liberally in fire extinguishing charms. The fire was soon out, although the bookshelf didn't look like it'd ever be the same again.

"Sorry!" gasped Luella in horror. "I didn't know it'd do that!"

Caitlin smiled weakly. "It's alright, love. Not your fault, but be careful in future. African magic pulls no punches and that wand has Tal-y-Rhys power mixed in too." She turned back to the bookcase, now charred at one end, and fixed it with a few more charms to stop it collapsing. "Ah well, at least the books are alright. And thank Hecate I don't keep the really dangerous books on that one."

"Dangerous books?" Severus's attention was caught. "You've got some dangerous Dark Arts manuals lying around?"

"Maybe." said Caitlin mysteriously. "And no I am not letting you study them. Or you, Luella."

Luella couldn't hide her disappointment, and she noticed Severus wasn't particularly happy either. However, she was more concerned about the damaged bookshelf.

"Sorry about the shelves though, Caitlin. They weren't an ancient family heirloom, were they?"

Caitlin shook her head with a smile. "19.99 from Ikea. Don't worry, there's more where they came from." Here, a rather less pleasant smile appeared. "You can help me pick a new one."

"Great." muttered Luella. She'd never liked furniture or DIY stores - childhood afternoons spent trailing round B&Q or Do It All after her parents had left their mark. "That'll be fun."

"I can see you're going to be having an interesting time here, Luella." Severus remarked. "Do enjoy yourself, won't you?"

"If she lets me." Luella muttered darkly.

"That's a point." said Caitlin thoughtfully as she returned to the sofa, the other two following her. "What are we going to do with you? I mean, I know I said you'd be staying here earlier, but now I think of it, you might be better off with your own parents."

"The thought of having to provide regular, well-balanced meals hitting home, is it Caitlin?" laughed Severus.

"No." snapped Caitlin, although Luella could tell that his comment wasn't entirely off the mark. "Just that I don't like the thought of keeping all this from the Martins. I mean, for Luella to stay here, unknown, I'd have to keep her inside the whole time, insist on her using Glamour when she did go out, have to make sure her parents

didn't see anything unusual. It's a big strain, and we're going to need all the strength we can get. I really feel we should reduce the need for secrecy by telling her parents something, and if we can do that, then she can stay with them and at least live in her own home."

Luella went pale. "You're not going to tell them I've been expelled!" she gasped.

Caitlin shook her head. "No, of course not! Severus and I will make sure that they don't overreact."

"And Memory Charm them if they do." Severus added.

"You're going to lie to them?" Luella asked, stunned.

"Not quite." said Caitlin, squirming. "Just... not quite tell them everything."

Luella still felt dubious about this. "I'm still not sure. It sounds... unethical."

"You want us to tell them the truth?" asked Severus derisively.

"Well, no." admitted Luella.

"Exactly." Severus folded his arms. "Luella, they may be your parents, but they're still only Muggles. They won't understand all the issues. Some Muggles do, but not, I think, your family. At the end of the day, you're not really one of them, you're a witch. And there will always be a part of your life you can't share with them."

"Suppose." sighed Luella, dejected. Caitlin put her arms around the teenager.

"Don't worry, love. It'll be alright. We'll make sure they understand everything and aren't too upset. At least this way you get to see them, and don't have to sneak around hoping they don't see you."

"Guess so." Luella yawned, suddenly realising how exhausted she was.

Caitlin patted her on the shoulder. "You look worn out, dear. Tell you what, Severus and I will go over to your parents now and have a word with them. You go to bed. You can have Deanna's room. Spend the night here, and we'll move you over there tomorrow. Is that alright?"

Luella nodded, feeling wearier by the second. And so, bidding goodnight to Caitlin and Severus, she went to bed.

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Much later, Severus and Caitlin emerged from the Martins' house.

"Well. That went better than expected." sighed Caitlin as she let them both back in.

"It could have been worse." Severus agreed. "We only had to resort to fast talking a couple of times, and we didn't need too much charm and manipulation either."

"At least they didn't threaten to stop Luella having anything to do with magic again." said Caitlin, just a little too brightly.

"Mr. Martin only just restrained himself though." Severus pointed out. "Can't say I blame him - if anyone had told me Deanna was at risk of being attacked at school by some maniac with a grudge, I'd have hit the roof myself."

"I thought you handled him very well." Caitlin soothed him. "I especially liked the way you said that all Muggle-born children were being sent home as a precautionary measure. Kind of took the heat off Luella."

"Why, thank you." Severus smiled. "You did rather well with the whole 'as a parent myself...' routine. Well done. And I only noticed you use Glamoury three times."

"Yeah, when I went in, while I was there and when I left." laughed Caitlin. "Still, they seem to have calmed down, they're more than willing to have Luella back, they don't think she's to blame for anything in the slightest, and they're going to let her come over here for her studies. All things considered, I think we can count this evening a success."

In more ways than one, Severus thought, suddenly realising he was now alone with Caitlin and making sure he had a clear run for the door. Still, she didn't seem dangerous right now, although he knew better than anyone how that was often the worst time. However, he didn't think she'd attack him again. Her old rage seemed to have been expended during his last visit here, and now he just sensed sadness. But that didn't mean he wasn't afraid.

Caitlin had fallen silent herself, and Severus could tell she knew what was on his mind. She looked as awkward as a teenager on her first date.

"So, er, do you want a drink or anything? Coffee, tea, something stronger? I've got some Jack Daniels in if you want a JD and Coke."

"Um, no. No thanks." Severus glanced at the door, suddenly experiencing a yearning to be back in his dungeon quarters, curled up with the Hogwarts copy of the Necronomicon and a good brandy. "I'd better be going, it's getting late."

"OK." Caitlin seemed resigned. "Thanks, Severus, you've been wonderful. A great help. I couldn't have handled all this without you." She stepped forward, causing him to shrink away. Don't hurt me again, he silently pleaded, trying to banish the image of him lying helpless and naked on the floor, with Caitlin standing over him like some terrifying ancient Mother Goddess. But this time, all she did was place her hands gently on his shoulders, stand on tiptoes and kiss him once on the cheek, making him shudder violently in terror. But a terror that had a disturbingly erotic tinge to it. Her touch, her very nearness, every searing memory of her hands on his body as she gratified her rage and lust for revenge made him tremble, terrified it might be repeated, praying that she might do it again.

He lifted his eyes and gazed directly into hers. He didn't detect Glamoury being used, and yet he still felt like he was in some kind of trance as he found himself bending down and closing his eyes, bringing his lips to meet those lifted upwards in anticipation, feeling flesh meeting, lips parting, tongues entwining and arms sliding around each other as a tentative kiss turned into something rather more full on.

Until whatever spell had held them both broke, and Severus felt the terror come rushing back. Thrusting her away in a manner his younger self would have had an apoplectic fit over, he staggered backwards, reaching for the door.

Caitlin had leapt back herself, stunned at her bravado and surprisingly contrite.

"Severus, I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me!" she gasped.

Once upon a time, a witty comeback along the lines of "me if you carry on like that" would have leapt immediately to his lips. Not now.

"Caitlin, I... don't... please don't... don't hurt me..." he stammered.

"No. No, I won't." she whispered, standing back and holding her palms up. "Don't worry, I won't touch you. Listen, I... I think you'd better go. I... don't think you should be alone with me, I don't trust myself."

Severus nodded, glad of the reprieve. "Yes. Yes, I think I'd better... Er, it was nice to see you again, Caitlin, it's been a productive evening and no doubt I'll see you again soon. Goodbye." With that, he darted out of the front door before that voice that haunted his dreams could say another word and summon him back.

Caitlin closed the door behind him, leaning against it for support, cursing her foolishness. Why on earth had she let her self-control go like that? Of course he wouldn't want to touch her, and not here of all places, not after last time. And yet she couldn't shake the memory of that kiss, completely unplanned and unlooked-for, and so spine-tinglingly pleasurable. What she wouldn't give to have more of that! One day, Cait, one day, she told herself. Until then, the memory and her own imagination would have to do. And with that in mind, she headed for bed.

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The atmosphere at Hogwarts was scarcely less tense. Deanna had returned to the Slytherin Common Room after her battle with Ron still covered in blood. Nothing had been said - when Deanna was in that sort of mood with all too visible evidence of what had happened to the last poor unfortunate to cross her there for all to see, no one dared to ask any questions - but all guessed that whoever had shopped Luella had been dealt with. Draco and friends in particular had looked rather nervous and immediately busied themselves with their work, not daring to meet Deanna's eyes, although in that last respect they were hardly alone.

In the days that followed, no one mentioned the expulsion. It was a topic none spoke of out loud, for fear of angering Deanna. However, there was an unspoken sense that Luella was not to blame, that she'd almost certainly been framed... and that even if she

hadn't and there was some truth to it all, she was still very much one of them. It wasn't said out loud, but it was there. There in the way even Deanna's enemies treated her without malice, there in the way no one used it to gain political advantage, there in the way the entire house seemed to close ranks against the rest of the school, cooling relations with non-Slytherin friends, not rejoicing in the Heir's supposed capture, walking away when others spoke of it. Deanna and her friends for their part didn't say thank you for the tacit support, but they knew it was there and appreciated it.

Support also came from the most unlikely of places - outside of Slytherin House itself, the biggest support came from the archrivals Gryffindor. Harry routinely pulled his wand out on anyone who talked ill of Luella in his hearing, Hermione gave Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil the sharp end of her tongue when they dared to gossip about the fallen Slytherin, and perhaps the biggest surprise of all, Ron came right out in support of her.

It happened a few days after Luella's departure. On the way to lunch, Marlie saw her Clearwater cousins in the Entrance Hall and ran over to them, not having really spoken to them properly since Penelope had been Petrified.

"Hey guys." she smiled. "How've you been? I mean, what with the whole Penny thing and all."

They didn't return her smile. Paul seemed indifferent, while Rachel was positively hostile.

"What's it to you, Slytherin?" she snapped at her cousin. Marlie recoiled, stunned at her vehemence.

"She's my cousin, Rach, I care about her!" she cried. "What's your problem?"

"Do we have to spell it out, Marlie?" sighed Paul.

"Cut her some slack, Pauly, sensitivity never was her strong point." Rachel sneered. "Or she'd know better than to come swanning around here like nothing ever happened when her best mate Petrified our sister!"

Marlie froze. But not for long. Fury wasn't far behind. "She didn't do it!" yelled Marlie. "You really think I'd hang around with the Heir of Slytherin? As if, man. As if!"

"You expect us to believe that?" Rachel laughed. "What do you take us for, Lovegood? I mean, really."

Paul tapped his sister on the shoulder, shooting Marlie a look of cold indifference that hurt more than Rachel's anger had done. "Come on, sis. Leave her. Treacherous Slytherin tart's not worth bothering about."

Deanna and Rianne were by Marlie's side in a flash.

"Take it back." hissed Rianne, incandescent with fury.

"Marls is no traitor." said Deanna. "And if you fight her, you fight us."

Rachel shrugged, producing her wand. "Suits me. At least I don't have to worry about the Heir attacking me in my bed any more."

Paul produced his wand, ready to stand by his sister, and some other Ravenclaws emerged as well, ready to help if required.

And as if summoned by some mysterious psychic force, Draco Malfoy, Pansy Parkinson, Crabbe and Goyle appeared out of nowhere, standing by their fellow Slytherins.

"Marls is my cousin and housemate." Draco announced. "We may have our differences, but I won't stand by and see her insulted. She had nothing to do with your sister's regrettable accident."

Deanna, Rianne and Marlie could only gaze in amazement. Marlie began to smile just a little as Draco gave a small smile and a discreet wink that seemed to say *I haven't forgotten the summer*.

Pansy noticed the disbelieving looks Deanna and Rianne were giving her. "Don't look like that. We stand up for our own."

"News to me." muttered Rianne. Deanna just shrugged.

"Fair enough. Now, Rachel. Ready to back down?"

Rachel just glared, and things could have turned nasty had they not been suddenly interrupted by a voice from the stairs. The voice of Ron Weasley.

"Break it up, you guys."

They all turned to look. And promptly stared in disbelief at Ron Weasley breaking up a fight that involved Slytherins. Ignoring the stares, he descended to ground level and positioned himself between them.

"Weasley, what are you doing?" Deanna demanded.

"Yeah, Weasley, get out of the way, we're trying to kick Ravenclaw butt here." snapped Pansy.

Ron held up his hands. "Ordinarily, I wouldn't stop you, but I'd like to avoid bloodshed if at all possible." He caught Deanna's eye. "There's been enough of that already." Deanna had the grace to look a little guilty.

"Go on then." she heard herself saying. "Say your piece."

"OK." Ron turned to address the Clearwaters. "Right you two, I know Lu Martin's been expelled for hurting your sister. And I know Marls was a friend of hers. But she's still your cousin, man. Does family mean nothing to you at all?"

"That's rich, coming from you!" laughed Rachel.

"Yeah, you've hardly spoken to your sister all year." Paul added.

Ron looked a little non-plussed but swiftly recovered. "Um, yeah. Yeah. It's true. And you know why I haven't spoken to her all year?"

"Why's that then?" yawned Draco.

"Because he's a moron?" Rianne asked, wondering just where this was going. Ron leapt at her words, thankful that he'd never really prized his dignity anyway.

"Yes!" he yelled. "She's absolutely right! Because I'm a moron!"

"Boy, you can say that again." Pansy commented. Ron ignored her.

"It's true!" he continued. "I am a divot. A complete and total prat. There aren't many stupider than me. All the time, I do idiotic and prattish things and sometimes even I don't know why! Ask anyone. My housemates. My friends. Ask Harry, he'll give you a list." He indicated a watching Harry, who was nodding wholeheartedly. "Ask my family. My brothers'll be the first to agree. Won't you, lads?" He turned to Fred and George, who'd approached to offer Marlie a hand when the fight had first threatened to break out.

"Absolutely." Fred nodded.

"Too right." George agreed. "Everyone else got nicknames like Bill, Charlie, Perce, Freddy Boy and Gin. He got landed with Idiot."

"Some people reckon he's a few cards short of a Tarot Deck, but we don't think that's true."

"In his case, the entire Major Arcana's missing."

"In fact, Ron was so stupid as a kid..." Fred was about to continue until Ron interrupted.

"Yes, yes, that's quite enough, we get the picture." He turned back to the Ravenclaws. "See, that's why I've been ignoring Ginny all term. I'm an idiot. You guys, on the other hand, are meant to be Ravenclaws. You guys are meant to be smart! You're meant to not only be able to think, but to bloody well enjoy it! So what's your excuse?"

Rachel didn't answer. She was looking away, rather embarrassed. It was Paul who answered.

"Luella did get expelled for the attacks. And Marlie is still supporting her. Not one word of apology or recompense have we had."

"Well... why should she?" Ron asked. "Wasn't Marls who hurt your sister. In fact, I don't think Lu had anything to do with it either. Why would a Muggle-born attack other Muggle-borns? It doesn't make sense. Unless of course you factor in the fact that this Muggle-born had enemies." Here he shot a dirty look at Draco, who looked innocently away. He turned back to the twins. "I don't know about you, but I don't think the case is closed by a long shot. I think Lu's innocent. And I think you're wrong." He stared at them, daring them to defy him. They didn't. After all, they were Ravenclaws, and fighting is not in their nature. Rachel lowered her eyes, sheathed her wand and, indicating for her housemates and brother to follow, slipped away. Nearby, Draco breathed a sigh of relief and made his own exit, his friends behind him. Leaving Ron alone with Deanna, Marlie and Rianne.

It was Marlie who spoke first. "You didn't have to do that!" she blurted out. "We could have handled it."

"I know." said Ron. "But I thought I'd better step in. I felt like I owed you guys. I thought it needed to be said that it wasn't Luella. Especially by me." Here he looked Deanna square in the eyes. She met his gaze with a look that seemed to be weighing him up very carefully. Finally, she gave a small smile.

"You know Ron, you were wrong, you know."

"About what?" Ron asked, puzzled.

"About being an idiot. That was one of the smartest things you've done in ages." She gave a cursory nod. "Gryffindors do have their uses after all. See you later, Ron." She indicated for the others to follow her and the three of them went for lunch.

Ron watched them go, puzzled. He never could work Slytherins out. Especially not when Slytherins who'd previously hated each other were now joining forces. Bizarre.

He turned round and noticed Harry and Hermione watching him. He wandered over, noticing that Harry looked a little less hostile than usual.

"So, er, how's things?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Lu's still not here." Harry said, glaring at him. "And now is a little late to come out in her favour and decide she's innocent. Shame you didn't think that before you went running to Malfoy." With that, he turned and walked away.

Hermione remained behind, placing a hand on his arm to comfort him. "He'll come around." she said confidently. "He won't hate you forever. You just wait."

"Yeah, but for how long?" sighed Ron, depressed. "I am a grade A moron, Herm. Why'd I do it?"

The first hint of disapproval flickered across Hermione's face. "Well, I'm sure you had your reasons, Ron." she said stiffly. But the look soon faded. "That was a very brave thing you did just then, Ron. I'm proud of you. Well done."

"Cheers. Glad someone thinks it was a good idea. Poor old Marls, though. She used to hang around with the Clearwaters all the time, she's going to be miserable without them."

"She's still got Deanna and Rianne." Hermione reminded him.

"Yeah, but they're not family, are they?" said Ron.

"No, suppose not. And talking of family." Hermione indicated the redhaired youngster watching them from the stairwell. Ginny. Ron turned and saw her watching him, wide-eyed. He turned back to Hermione, who was giving him a meaningful look.

"Should I talk to her then?" he asked halfheartedly.

Hermione nodded. "Seeing as you've publicly admitted you've been acting like an idiot all year by ignoring her, and have just told the Clearwaters off for fighting family, I think you better had, hadn't you?"

Ron groaned. "Suppose I'd better. Wish me luck, Hermi." He turned and approached Ginny.

She didn't turn away as he drew near, just kept watching him warily as if he was some kind of wild beast that could pounce at any second. He didn't really blame her.

"So, er, Ginny, how've you been? How's Slytherin House taking things?"

Ginny shrugged. "As well as can be expected. Everyone's still in shock at the moment."

"Have they started planning the lynching yet?"

She shook her head. "No. That's Deanna's prerogative and word is she's already done it. No one knows for sure though. Everyone's too scared to ask her."

"Smart move." Ron agreed. "I wouldn't want to be on her bad side." Not again, anyway. That was one lesson he wouldn't forget in a hurry. "Do you guys reckon she did it?"

"No way." The statement left no room for debate, yet next minute her composure cracked and she was in tears. "It wasn't her, couldn't have been! She didn't do it, she didn't do it, she's innocent, it wasn't her Ron!" she sobbed. "They're wrong, they're wrong, and now she's gone, her life's ruined and we're all in danger! She didn't do it, Ron!" With that, she started crying in earnest.

Ron really was at a loss now. He never had been any good at dealing with crying women, not that he'd had much practice, and when he knew it was his fault, it was even worse. However, he tried his best.

"Gin! Don't cry! Please!" he begged, putting an arm round her and fishing in his pocket for a handkerchief. "It'll be alright. She'll come back. You just watch."

Ginny refused to be comforted. "She won't! The governors all think she did it, they'll never let her come back!"

"They will." said Ron, suddenly fierce at the thought of his sister being upset. "You're forgetting that Deanna Tyler's on the case. She'll find out who really did it, and give 'em hell. And then Luella'll be cleared and she'll be on the next train back. You'll see!"

If anything, Ginny only cried all the harder.

"What?" asked Ron, now really confused. "What's the matter?"

Ginny shook her head. "I can't... I can't tell you, Ron!" she sobbed. "Don't ask me! I'm sorry!"

"Sorry?" asked Ron, perplexed. "What for? You've done nothing wrong! I'm the one who should be apologising. I've been rotten to you all year, and generally making your life a misery, and what for? Because you ended up in Slytherin. Of all the stupid, trivial reasons to cut somebody..." He shook his head in sorrow. "Some of the Slyths have more integrity than us Gryffindors. Even Malfoy's got a weird sense of honour underneath all the viciousness." He gave Ginny the first real smile she'd seen from him in a while. "I'm no better than the worst Slytherin, you know."

"Ron, that's not true..." Ginny began, but he cut her off.

"No, Gin, it's the truth. I'm not saying why, but trust me, I'm no angel. I've certainly got no right to pick on you. Gin, can you ever forgive me?"

Ginny looked up at him, amazed at his change in attitude. Slowly, she began to smile weakly before nodding. "OK." she whispered.

Ron sighed, suddenly feeling a weight slip from his mind. Smiling, he opened his arms and pulled Ginny into a hug.

"Thanks, sis." he said softly. "Whatever your ambitions, if you need any help, you know where to find me."

Ginny responded by returning the hug, burying her head in his robes. Ron just cuddled her, feeling profoundly relieved that at least one problem was now sorted out. However, had he seen the look on Ginny's face, one of apprehension and fear, he'd have had rather less to smile about.

They stayed like that for a while until a voice from the shadows interrupted them. Draco.

"So are you two talking again then?"

Ron released Ginny and looked up sharply. There he was, alone, leaning against the wall in the entrance to the dungeons, with that usual mocking grin that Ron always felt the urge to slap out of him firmly in place.

"Go away, Malfoy." he said through gritted teeth.

Draco just shrugged. "Alright, alright. I just wanted to make sure you really meant what you said earlier, that's all."

"Draco." said Ginny timidly. "Don't worry. We'll be fine. It's all OK now. Me and Ron have sorted things out."

Draco nodded. "Good." He paused. "It's about bloody time. See you later, Weasleys." With that, he turned and left. Ron turned to Ginny.

"How can you put up with him in your common room every day?"

"He's not that bad." said Ginny, a little defensively. "I mean, he's alright to me. Most of the time." she added.

"Well, you're a bloody saint for tolerating him, Gin." said Ron. "Anyway, I suppose I'll see you around?"

Ginny nodded. She looked up, an idea suddenly occurring to her. "Ron, wanna have lunch with me?"

"Lunch? With you?" Ron stared at her. "What, at the Slytherin table?"

Ginny nodded.

"Ber-loody hell, Gin, your lot'll probably want to kill me." Ron thought of the way they were all standing by Luella, and the fact that some of them knew all about his role in getting her expelled in the first place. No, they were definitely not going to want him at their table.

Ginny shook her head. "No they won't. You stood up for them. They won't forget that. At the very least it'll cancel out whatever else you might have done. Anyway," and here she smiled mischievously, "you're my brother. I'll make sure they don't hurt you."

Ron considered this for a minute. It was true, Deanna at least seemed to bear him no hostility any more. And if Deanna accepted him, then the others would probably follow her lead. He thought briefly of what Harry and Hermione would say. Then realised that Harry couldn't hate him any more than he already did, and that Hermione would be too pleased that he'd made up with Ginny to say anything else.

"Alright then. You got yourself a deal."

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Chapter Twenty Four Friday Night Armistice

Nothing of major import in Slytherin House happened after that. True, most of the school was taking pains to avoid them. And true, its inhabitants were generating more dark whispers in corners than usual. However, the Slytherins themselves were oddly calm. The willingness of the Weasley boys, not to mention Harry and Hermione, to stand up for them had touched quite a few Slytherins and consequently, there was very little of the usual fighting with Gryffindor. Taunts and whispers that would once have resulted in a fight, or the threat of one, now simply caused Slytherins to walk away. That and a desire to keep a low profile and stay out of trouble. Even Slytherins could have too much notoriety.

Relations inside the house were also notably friendlier. It was as if the perceived slight towards Slytherin had caused an unspoken agreement that, whatever their differences, they would pull together and support each other - for now, anyway. All the usual feuds and rivalries had been suspended, and Slytherins once at each other's throats now appeared to be behaving themselves.

This even held true for Draco and friends, and Deanna, Marlie and Rianne. To a point. While it was true that Deanna was loath to forgive Draco, and had refrained from punishing him only because he wasn't nearly so easy a target as Ron, Draco by contrast was singularly failing to taunt Deanna over losing her best friend. In fact, not a smirk had been seen. He'd kept himself to himself, barely even looked in Deanna's direction and on the few occasions they'd had to speak, had been worryingly polite almost to the point of humility.

Needless to say, this was not in character behaviour, and Draco's friends were noticing.

"So what's up with him anyway?" Pansy whispered to Crabbe one evening, watching Draco staring mindlessly into space.

"I don't know." said Crabbe, a little anxious himself. "He's been like this ever since Martin got kicked out. Really quiet and not saying much. Not very triumphant at all."

"Can't blame him there." said Pansy quietly. "I don't feel particularly triumphant myself. I feel like there's this bloody great big knife floating behind me about to stab me in the back at any time."

"Nah, that's fear of Tyler." said Crabbe. "Completely normal. Malfoy on the other hand... Scared isn't the word I'd use. I don't know what it is, it's like he wishes he hadn't done it, but not because he's scared Tyler's going to take some horrible revenge on him. He looks sad more than scared."

"You don't think it's that leaving speech of Martin's, do you?" Pansy asked, thinking back to the day Luella had left. Her parting words to Malfoy had had all the hallmarks of an ancient curse, and now it seemed to be coming true.

"Surely not." Crabbe said dismissively. "Martin's good, but not that good. And he's not the type to believe in things like that, is he? He must be the least suggestible person I know."

Pansy peered at him again. "You don't think he's feeling guilty, do you?"

"Can't be. Can he?" Crabbe looked at Draco again. "Blimey, Pansy, I didn't know he could feel guilty, not about hurting Tyler anyhow."

"Maybe it's not Tyler." said Pansy reflectively. "Maybe it's Lovegood."

"Lovegood?" Crabbe stared at her. "Are you sure?"

"Could be. She is his cousin after all, and he is remarkably fond of all her Muggle stuff."

Crabbe didn't seem able to believe what he was hearing. "Yeah, but... she's a half-blood."

"So's his mother." Pansy pointed out. "And you know how he feels about her."

Crabbe did know only too well. Narcissa Malfoy was considered sacrosanct and no one, not even his friends, dared utter a word against her in Draco's hearing.

"And," Pansy pressed, "you too own a Walkmage. Not to mention several Muggle rock CDs. So don't tell me you're completely against Muggle technology!"

"Well, not in principle." Crabbe muttered. "Just a shame the Muggles had to develop it - it's entirely too good for them."

"You'll be taking down your Nirvana posters then." Pansy snapped. A note of panic crept into Crabbe's eyes.

"Not my Kurt Cobain poster." he whimpered. "I like that one!"

"My point exactly." Pansy sat back and folded her arms, her point proved to her satisfaction. "And who introduced you to all this Muggle culture?"

"Lovegood did." muttered Crabbe.

"Precisely. Now, look at her. Which member of Draco's family does Marlene Lovegood most resemble? Here's a hint - I just mentioned her earlier."

"His mum?" Crabbe looked at Marlie, comparing her to Narcissa Malfoy as he'd last seen her. Pansy was right. "Bloody Hades, they do look alike, don't they?"

"Exactly." said Pansy, rather smug at having successfully found the cause of Draco's apparent depression. "Now, given that Draco is quite taken by some Muggle stuff, and has been introduced to it by a cousin of his who looks just like his adored mother, is it

not natural that he's going to feel a little guilty about getting one of her mates expelled? Especially after she publicly slaps him and yells abuse at him."

"Suppose." Crabbe admitted. He turned back to Draco. "But he shouldn't do, it's a bloodfeud, and Lovegood's on the wrong side."

"Doesn't mean a thing." Pansy sighed. "You can be at war with someone's family and still like them personally. All the best tragedies are made up of that."

Crabbe just groaned. "Gods, Pansy, you and your bloody star-crossed lovers romances." He shot another glance at Draco. "He will snap out of it, won't he?"

"Hope so." Here, a note of anxiety entered Pansy's voice. "I mean, he's not in love with her or anything. I'm sure he'll be OK."

Crabbe forced some confidence into his own demeanour. "Yeah. Yeah, he'll be OK. He just needs time to get his head round the idea."

"Course he will."

"Of course."

However, Draco's strange behaviour did not change. Time passed, the Easter holidays came and went, and still he remained penitent. And Draco himself was no less confused than his friends were about the cause. So confused, that uncharacteristically for him, he decided to seek advice.

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The rather subdued knocking at his office door caused Severus to look up with a start. Friday afternoon was not a usual time for students to call on him, not voluntarily anyway. He glanced at his detentions book. Some Hufflepuffs due in for a detention that evening, and a Gryffindor fifth year scheduled for clearing out the cauldrons at four o'clock. That was it.

Very unusual. He whistled Corvus over.

"Corvus, go and find out who that is."

"Getting up and opening the door yourself too much work, is it?" the raven snapped as he fluttered across the room, peered through the keyhole in the door and flew back to Severus's shoulder.

"Well?" he asked the bird.

"Dragon-boy. Looking rather pensive, I must say. Not his usual superior self at all. What've you got him down for then? Must be pretty unpleasant for him to look like that." "Nothing." Severus murmured. He paused, certain suspicions making themselves felt. "Yet. Well, we shall see, won't we? Better find out what he wants." He raised his voice. "Come in, Malfoy. And close the door behind you, won't you?"

Draco entered, blinking in astonishment. "How'd you know it was me?" he demanded.

"I have my methods." Severus replied enigmatically. Much as he liked the boy, it wasn't good to reveal all his little trade secrets. Better to keep this one in awe. "Well, well, come in boy, take a seat, make yourself at home. What are you after now? I might as well tell you now that I am not going to mark up any of your Potions work, not that you need it, nor am I going to teach you anything Dark Arts related, not that I'd know in any case."

Draco looked disbelieving but didn't comment. Who knew what his parents had told him about the past? However, it seemed that the boy had other reasons for being here. For once.

"No, don't worry, sir, it's nothing like that. I, er..." Here he hesitated, seemingly uncertain as to what to tell him. Severus felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. What on earth had Malfoy been up to now?

"I, er... need some advice." the boy said haltingly. Severus narrowed his eyes.

"What sort of advice?"

"Er..." Draco paused again, getting his thoughts in order. Finally he let it out. "I did something that, um, caused a lot of trouble for certain people. At the time, I thought it was a good idea, but now I, er, kind of wish I hadn't done it."

Severus didn't comment, merely raising an eyebrow. Give a man enough rope and he will surely hang himself at some point. "Go on."

"Erm... well..." Draco's hesitancy finally gave way to a helpless fury. "Make it stop! Please! I hate feeling like this, I hate feeling like such a git, I hate feeling wrong!" he snarled. "I shouldn't feel this way, I should be glad for scoring such a victory over her, I should be rubbing it in her face, and instead I'm feeling like I'm the one who's lost..." He stopped himself just in time. "Who's lost." he finished lamely.

"I see." said Severus, guessing only too well what Draco was referring to. However, he checked the impulse to give the boy his worst. A Malfoy actually feeling guilty was a rare occurrence indeed, and Severus didn't want to discourage the first feeble stirrings of a conscience by killing it before it could grow. He held his tongue and waited to see what else Draco would tell him.

"I can't stand it." said Draco softly. "I can't take much more of this. I hate feeling like this, I hate myself so much, and I hate *her* for making me feel like this! Gods damn it, but I don't even like her, why do I feel so bad about hurting her?" He turned to Severus, eyes silently pleading. "Help me, sir. Help me make it stop, make it go away!"

"Well, we shall see." Severus replied, voice as smooth as ever. "This person who you were aiming to injure, had she done anything wrong to you?"

"Kind of." said Draco uncertainly. "She'd hurt some friends of mine."

"I see." He was right. He could see all too clearly where this was going. "Do you think she may have been justified in hurting those friends of yours?"

"Er... maybe." Draco admitted. "I mean, she only did it because they hurt a friend of hers."

"And that friend of hers, is she also someone you yourself have a fairly high regard for?" Severus let him have it with the full, piercing stare that let Draco know that he knew exactly what he was referring to, but was too much the gentleman to say it out loud.

"Er... yes." Draco confessed in a very small voice indeed.

"So, in other words, you are admitting that maybe she was in the right in doing what she did to these friends of yours."

Draco nodded, unable to meet Severus's eyes.

"Which puts your own actions in a rather different light, does it not?"

Again, Draco nodded in silence.

"In that case, I think we have the source of your current ethical agonising right there, don't we?"

"Yes sir." Draco whispered. He finally looked up. "What do I do now, sir? I can't undo it. It's gone too far."

Severus reflected. True, Draco could hardly bring Luella back - the situation was no longer in his hands, hadn't been since he'd told his father what he'd learned from Weasley. However, maybe there were some things he could do.

"Well, Malfoy, it's been a while since I last consulted the Slytherin Code of Honour. However, I think that the usual course of action is to offer the victim an apology."

Draco froze. "An apology?"

"An apology."

The boy couldn't have looked more horrified if he'd been told that his father knew all about those summer trips to the Lovegoods.

"You're not serious."

"I am perfectly serious, Malfoy." Severus tried not to look too pleased at Malfoy's reaction. "Do you want to stop feeling guilty or not?"

"Yes, but..." Draco looked as if he'd almost rather have the guilt. "Apologise? Do I have to? I mean, can't I just give her the head of her worst enemy instead as a peace offering?"

"Her worst enemy?" Severus regarded him coolly, this time allowing a smile to escape. "That's you, isn't it?"

"Good point." Draco sighed, before bowing to the inevitable. "Alright, alright. I'll do it. Is there anything else?"

"Some form of compensation may be required."

"Will money do it?" Draco asked hopefully. He caught the look Severus was giving him. "No it won't, will it?"

"No. It will not. You will have to ask her and see what she wants. Unless you know of something within your power to deliver that she might conceivably want."

Draco fell silent at this, suddenly looking incredibly thoughtful. "You know, sir, I might just have the very thing. Well," and here a look of pain crossed his face, "two things really. But I'm hoping I won't have to use the other one. Father wouldn't be happy with me at all, and I think my friends would crucify me." He got up to leave. "Thanks sir. You've been really helpful."

"I like to think so." Severus murmured, pleased that Draco was not wholly beyond saving. Well done Luella, he thought, there's one Slytherin redeemed and you're not even here. "Good luck with your little discussion, Malfoy, I do hope it works out. But you may be in luck. I'm sure that an apology is the last thing she'll be expecting, so you'll be able to catch her off guard. Besides, I have it on very good authority that Miss Tyler's initial rage caught some other poor unfortunate instead, so she will be more mellow than previously and less likely to strangle you. Now. Good day, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco felt his blood freeze as his teacher finally uttered Deanna's name and hints became certainty.

"Sir, I... I'm sorry, I..."

"Yes, Malfoy, you've made your reasons abundantly clear. Good day, Malfoy."

"Yes, sir." He was about to leave when a sudden burst of curiosity caught him. "Sir... did she hurt Weasley a lot?"

"That, Malfoy, is none of your business." Severus folded his arms and looked straight at him with the all too familiar look that seemed to see right through you. "Let's just say matters were settled to her satisfaction." He looked meaningfully at the boy. Draco was not slow in taking the hint.

"I see. Well, in that case, I'll be off. Be seeing you, sir." And with that, he left before that look of Veritaserum could unearth any more secrets. Leaving a contented Severus looking forward to hearing the results.

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The results weren't slow in coming. Resolving to get it over with, Draco approached Deanna that very evening.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped at him, irritated at being interrupted in the middle of her Charms homework.

"Yeah, Malfoy, she's working." called Rianne. "It doesn't happen often, don't stop her for gods' sake."

Draco ignored her. "Tyler, can we talk?"

"I've got nothing to say to you, Malfoy." Deanna turned back to her work. Draco was not to be put off. Now he'd committed himself to ritual humiliation, he was determined to go through with it. In fact, he'd damn well make her listen to him if he had to.

"That's fine with me. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to. But I've got a few things to say to you, and I'm not going anywhere until I've said them."

Deanna laid down her quill and turned to face him, eyebrow raised, curious but doing her best not to show it. "Really."

"Yes, really." snapped Draco.

Deanna leant back, arms folded. "Go on then."

That threw him. "What, now? Here? In front of everyone?" He shot an anxious glance around the room. Sure enough, everyone else was watching, itching to know how this would turn out and if there'd be blood. Draco began to panic. "Can't we go somewhere a little more private?"

This produced the usual chorus of sneers and insinuations from the watching Slytherins.

"Hey Tyler, looks like you got yourself an admirer!" Mike Lovegood called from across the room, as Marlie dissolved into giggles.

"Private conversations, eh?" Rianne remarked, throwing a knowing glance in Lucas Vetinari's direction. "We've all heard that one before, haven't we?"

"Better watch yourself, Tyler." Lucas smirked. "If he mentions showing you his etchings, make yourself scarce."

Draco had by this time turned a deep shade of crimson, wishing fervently that the ground would swallow him up, or the roof would cave in, anything to escape this. If Severus had been watching, he would have nearly fainted with delight. His plan for chastising Draco was going even better than he had hoped.

Deanna, in contrast, was sitting bolt upright, all icy affronted dignity.

"Draco Malfoy," she announced, "is *not* interested in me. Is he?" She fixed Draco with her most penetrating stare. Draco didn't dare contradict her.

"No, Tyler." he said hastily. "Not in the slightest. I still need to talk to you though. Alone."

Deanna nodded, getting to her feet, curiosity having got the better of her, not to mention a nagging feeling that he wouldn't leave her alone until she'd heard him out. "Alright then. I'll listen. This had better be worth it though." She turned to Rianne, removing a hair from her head and tying it around her friend's wand. "If I'm not back in half an hour, come and find me with the Point Me charm. Bring Marls and a couple of the lads." Rianne nodded, understanding. Deanna turned back to Draco.

"Right, you. Let's talk."

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Deanna led him through the dungeon complex, putting enough distance between them and the common room to deter eavesdroppers, but at the same time, not going so far that assistance would be slow in coming. Draco had no intention of arguing with her - he didn't want to be too far from safety either. He hadn't forgotten the image of Deanna walking zombielike into the Serpents' Nest, blood down her front and on her fingers, not looking at anyone and heading straight for her dorm. No prizes for guessing which poor bastard had fallen foul of her. And if she could hate Ron Weasley that much, how much worse would it be for him? Snape's words came back to him - "Her worst enemy? That's you, isn't it?" Draco began to wish he'd never started this. Still, it was too late to back out now.

Deanna stopped in front of a cell which Draco realised with a shock was the one where Ron had first made that fateful confession. How ironic. Of course, the irony went even deeper than he knew. It was also the scene of Deanna's confrontation with Ron. Which was why she'd chosen it.

"In." she ordered him. Draco obeyed. This was not a good start. He surveyed the dimly lit dungeon again as Deanna lit the torches with a word, noticing with a shiver that there were bloodstains on the floor which he could have sworn hadn't been there last time. He just hoped that his wouldn't be added to them.

Deanna closed the door behind her, although, Draco noticed, she left it unlocked. That gave him a little hope - she too obviously wanted an escape route available. However, he noted she was staying in between him and the door. Not so good.

"So what do you want then, Malfoy?" Deanna snapped, diverting him from his tactical calculations. "This had better be good. And bear in mind you're not my favourite person at the moment."

No change there, then, Draco thought, although he wisely kept that to himself. Keep to the point, Malfoy, he told himself.

"I know." he said, readying himself for his next act, steeling himself for something no Malfoy in the family's entire history had ever done before - apologising to a Tal-y-Rhys. "And that's why I wanted to talk to you. You see..." he paused, trying to find the words. No sense making a bigger fool of himself than he had to, after all. "I mean... what I'm trying to say is..."

"Get on with it, Malfoy." Deanna interrupted. "I don't have all day!"

"OK, OK." snapped Draco. "What I'm trying to say is... I'm sorry."

Deanna stared at him. "Sorry?" she repeated.

Draco nodded. "Yeah. Sorry." Now it was out, he found himself becoming oddly more relaxed. The worst was over.

"What for?" asked Deanna, looking at him rather strangely, seeming completely at a loss to understand him. He didn't blame her. This wasn't something that either of them had ever been told was in the script.

"For..." Draco hung his head. "For telling my father what Ron told me about Luella."

Now Deanna really was staring at him as if he'd gone mad. "You what?"

"You heard." Draco lifted his eyes to glare back at her. "Look, don't play ignorant with me, you must know all about it. It's hardly a secret our families hate each other and my friends have a grudge and a half against you."

"I know all that!" snapped Deanna. "But... you're sorry?!"

"Yeah." Draco nodded. "I'm sorry."

Deanna stared at him for a moment before suddenly exploding. "What do you mean you're sorry?!?" she yelled at him. "You're not meant to be sorry! You're meant to be all cocky and triumphant, strutting around the common room like you own it, sitting there smirking at me and making me feel completely pissed off and powerless. You're meant to lord it over me and bask in the afterglow while I seethe in the shadows, watching and waiting for an opportunity to get revenge! That's what you're meant to do! That's how bloodfeuds work! You're not meant to be sorry!"

Draco raised an eyebrow, determined to brazen it out and secretly rather pleased to have wrongfooted her. "Oh? And why not?"

Deanna seemed lost for words. "Because... because... because it's against the rules!" she spluttered.

"Rules?" Now it was Draco's turn to stare. "We're involved in a mortal bloodfeud that makes the Montague-Capulet feud look like a lovers' tiff, and you're bothered about the rules?"

"Yeah!" shouted Deanna. "Damn you, Malfoy! What's the point of a feud if you start feeling sorry? What's the good in victory if you don't enjoy it? What's the good in losing if you can't console yourself with twisted fantasies of revenge?"

"Spoilt all your fun, have I, Tyler?" Draco murmured, beginning to rather enjoy himself.

"Yes, damn it!" Deanna yelled at him. "All that's been keeping me going since Lu went is dreaming of how many ways I can make you pay! I've spent night after night fantasising about kicking your head in, working out grandiose schemes to humiliate you and bring you to your knees! And now you say you're sorry?!"

Draco stepped back, stunned at her reaction. He'd expected some anger, true. He'd also expected a display of self-righteous smugness and some weird ritual of penance during which he'd have to humiliate himself and serve her every whim. He'd not expected this. She wasn't even trying to take advantage of the situation. If anything, this only made him feel worse.

She was turning away now, hunched up, arms folded, more vulnerable now than he'd ever seen her. And even stranger, he had no desire to take advantage either. In fact, he just wanted to get out. Now.

"You bastard, Malfoy." she whispered. "You have completely and utterly taken away my right to be angry! How on earth am I meant to take a brutal and bloody revenge on someone who's sorry? You complete and utter..." She shook her head, words failing her.

"I'm sorry." Draco whispered, reaching out to touch her shoulder, trying to comfort her. Deanna pushed him away, furious once more.

"Will you stop saying that?" she raged at him. "You know, I really don't get you, Malfoy! One minute you're conspiring to get my friend expelled, the next you're standing up for me in public and acting all contrite in private! One day, you're hanging round at Marlie's playing Sonic and watching videos, and the next gloating because you've taken her old job. What the hell is it with you, Malfoy?" Deanna stared at him, uncomprehending. "Why do you have to be so fucking ambivalent the whole time? Can't you just be our sworn enemy and have done? Or if you must insist on being our friend, can't you just do it and get it over with? Damn it, Malfoy, just pick a side and stick to it!"

"I can't." Draco whispered. This incensed her all the more.

"Why the hell not?" she thundered. Draco just shook his head.

"Not so simple, Tyler. It's easy for you. All your friends, your family, they're all on the same side! They get on. You don't have to worry about your mother disapproving of them, because she likes them all. Because half of them are the children of her best friends anyway." Draco fixed her with a steely, almost vindictive gaze. "You can hang around with pretty much anyone and you don't have to worry about what your parents will say, what your friends will say. Your friends are your friends, and your enemies

are your enemies, and never the twain shall meet. You don't have to worry about the people you like being the ones it's politically inconvenient for you to see. Damn, I envy you sometimes." He turned away, feeling the bitterness of it all come flooding back. He might have taken Marlie's job... but that didn't mean he'd enjoyed it. After all, when his father had announced that he'd just bought seven top flight brooms in order for Draco to finally achieve his Quidditch ambitions, he was hardly going to turn around and say 'Sorry, Dad, I can't do it, Marlie's my friend', was he? Not when your father was Lucius Malfoy, you didn't.

Deanna's anger had abated, at least for now. Right now, she just looked weary, very weary.

"Malfoy, what is it you want me to do?" she sighed. "I can't give you absolution. I can't straighten your life out for you. I can't get Marls to start talking to you again. You'd have to bring Lu back, and resign from the team in Marls's favour, and that's just a start. Too much has happened for me to turn round and forgive you, just like that. Best you can hope for is that I stop hating you."

Draco nodded, hanging his head. It was what he'd expected, more or less, and yet it still hurt. The guilt hadn't really gone, although it wasn't so naggingly insistent, and her firm insistence that the best he could hope for was indifference stung him to depths he hadn't known were there.

"I can't do what you ask." he whispered. "I can't go to Dumbledore and take back everything, Father'd never let her come back anyway. And I can't leave the team either, not after the money Father spent on those brooms, he'd go ballistic." He looked up, eyes gleaming. "But I can do one thing for you. I hear you've been having trouble with the reserve Beaters."

"Possibly." said Deanna, regarding him warily.

"They won't hassle you again." said Draco firmly. He turned to go. "I think I'd better leave."

"I think you better had." said Deanna, by now well over her weirdness quotient, and longing to get as far away from Draco as possible. "Don't let me stop you." She stood aside to let him leave. He did so, not sorry to finally escape, leaving a bewildered Deanna staring after him.

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Draco fairly raced up the passageway, desperate for some kind of sanctuary. Well, it was done. It was over, and Deanna Tyler hadn't given him a thorough going over. But had the alternative been any better? He shook himself, thoroughly unnerved. He'd seen Deanna Tyler vulnerable, and it hadn't been as pleasurable as he'd been led to expect. In fact, more than anything, he'd wanted to run. Run, as he was doing now, trying to get far, far away.

In the end, his footsteps found themselves leading inexorably to where all this had started - Snape's office.

Once more, Draco hadn't even knocked before he heard his House Head's voice calling.

"Come in, Malfoy. Try not to slam the door like you usually do."

Draco opened the door, amazed. "How do you do that?" he demanded.

"Trade secret." Snape told him, clearly amused. Perched on the back of his chair, that damn raven of his that always gave him the creeps fluttered its wings, cawing in a way that sounded eerily like laughter to Draco's ears. "One day, I may tell you what it is."

"Going to be any time soon?" Draco asked half-heartedly as he slumped into the chair opposite.

"Hardly. Maybe after you've finished school." Snape leaned back, dropping the banter and assuming that penetrating look that could unearth secrets faster than a Niffler in Gringotts. "So. May I take it that you've spoken with Miss Tyler?"

Draco nodded.

"And?" Snape probed. "What happened? You're not bleeding so it obviously didn't go too badly."

Draco just laughed. "Yeah? That's what you think. I'd rather have had the beating."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "Indeed? Interesting. Very interesting. I think you had better acquaint me with events."

So Draco did. Snape listened intently, not saying a word, although when Draco told of how Deanna had turned away once her anger was exhausted, her pain at losing her friend there for all to see, his eyes seemed to go cold for just the briefest of moments, although seconds later, the look of concentration was in place once more.

Finally, Draco brought his story to an end. "And that's how it ended." he finished. "With her just standing back and letting me leave. I don't know who was more freaked out by the whole thing, her or me. Can't really blame her, I don't think a Malfoy's ever apologised to a Tal-y-Rhys before."

"Or indeed, to anyone else for that matter." Snape murmured, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "But you still haven't told me why you'd rather have had the beating."

"Isn't it obvious?" Draco laughed.

Snape shook his head. "Not immediately. Suppose you tell me more?"

"I hurt her, sir." said Draco quietly, not meeting his teacher's eyes. "The whole Luella expulsion thing, it really hurt her. I thought she'd be OK about it. Well, not OK, but I thought she'd understand that it wasn't personal, not really. She's a Tal-y-Rhys, I'm a Malfoy, it's what we do. We're meant to do anything possible to undermine each other,

that's what a bloodfeud means. I thought she'd brood over it and then start planning revenge. I didn't realise it'd upset her that much."

"You didn't think seeing her best friend wrongly expelled would get to her?" asked Snape, more than a little derision on his voice.

"Well, no. I mean, yes. I mean, I knew she wouldn't like it, but I didn't think it would hurt her so much. She seemed really upset." Draco stared gloomily into the empty fireplace. "This isn't how I thought it would go at all."

"Strange." Snape murmured, the light of comprehension dawning in his eyes. "That sounds rather like what Miss Tyler said to you earlier, that you weren't sticking to the bloodfeud rules."

Draco managed a small smile. "Yeah, it does, doesn't it? Ironic, eh?"

"Not really." Snape shrugged. "The victim isn't meant to feel pain, only anger and hate, the victor isn't meant to feel guilty but triumphant. According to the usual rules, the two warring sides are meant to hide their true feelings from each other. Were it not for the frequently very serious consequences, is it not the case that bloodfeuds are approached almost like a game by the participants?"

"Well, yeah." Draco admitted.

"Indeed. Except it's not a game any more, is it?"

"No." whispered Draco, his voice almost imperceptible now. Snape's gaze didn't let up for a second.

"My point exactly. Things just got serious, didn't they? You just discovered that your actions went far deeper than you imagined, and now you can't emotionally distance yourself any more, can you? You've had a glimpse of her true feelings, her true nature, and now you can't quite pigeonhole her as one of the enemy Tal-y-Rhys any more, can you?"

Draco shook his head, no longer trusting himself to speak. Everything Snape was saying made a horrible, gut-churning sense.

"In fact, not to put too fine a point on it, you're finally seeing her as human."

Draco finally met Snape's eyes. "Why?" he asked. "Why do things have to be so complicated? Why can't it be simple for once? Why can't I just see her as the enemy and be through with it? Why'd I have to start respecting her?"

"Could that be because Miss Tyler's more than worth respecting?" Snape asked idly, secretly wondering what had taken Malfoy so long to work that one out.

Draco just laughed. "Gods, yeah. Tyler, of all people. You know, I didn't think I was the compassionate type. Hurting Potter or Weasley, or Longbottom, that's second nature. I'd love to see them upset because of something I did."

Snape privately thought otherwise, but didn't contradict him. Let the boy speak, he counselled himself.

"But Tyler, on the other hand..." Draco continued. "She's different! She's not like Longbottom, she's not weak. She's tougher than her Doc Martens. She's not meant to run off crying, she's strong, she's in control, she's a Slytherin, for gods sake!" He shook his head. "I feel like such a heel."

From across the desk, the raven crowed again, with what could only be described as sarcasm. Snape scratched the bird under its beak.

"*Ssh, Corvus, you're not helping.*" he murmured. Draco looked up with a start.

"What was that?" he asked, wondering what on earth his teacher had just said.

"Nothing of importance." Snape said, just a little too quickly. "You were saying?"

Draco shrugged. "I don't know. Just that the likes of Longbottom cry at anything. For Tyler to be upset, it must have really got to her. Damn it!" He slammed his hand on to the arm of his chair. "Why is my life so complicated? Why can't I just choose a side and stick to it?"

Snape just tilted his head to one side and looked at the boy. "Well, why do you think that is?"

Draco shrugged. "Gods know. I used to pick on them the whole time. Used to love making their lives hell. Then I ended up teaming up with Marls to play this practical joke on Tyler."

"What happened?" asked Snape, recalling an occasion the previous year when an angry, overprotective Deanna had burst in on a Quidditch tuition session he'd been receiving from Caitlin, almost certainly as a result of something Marlene and Draco had said to her.

Draco couldn't help grinning at the memory. "Worked a treat. Poor old Tyler, she was well and truly stitched up. A beautiful, beautiful moment."

"And?" Snape prodded.

"And, er, in the celebratory aftermath, I couldn't help thinking that Marls was actually rather cool, seeing as she masterminded the thing." Draco admitted. "I began to wonder if maybe we had a fair bit in common after all. She's a lot like how I sometimes imagine Mother to have been when she was younger, especially looks wise."

"True enough." Snape responded. He'd noted the resemblance between Marlene and Narcissa long ago, although he also wished Marlene had inherited her aunt's inherent poise and dignity. Narcissa would never have had anything to do with the Weasley twins, and she rarely if ever misbehaved. "They are very similar."

"Exactly." said Draco. "Now you see why I started to think she wasn't so bad. The fact that she'd completely transformed the common room helped too. You can't spend all that time listening to Muggle tunes, doing your homework by lava lamp and watching Chris Bryant and Winter Montague re-enacting scenes from Red Dwarf without starting to appreciate certain aspects of Muggle culture, after all."

"Red Dwarf?" Snape couldn't help but wonder. It sounded ominously like a resurrection of something from the Death Eater days.

"Muggle TV series." Draco explained. "Apparently Bryant gets his brother to record it, and gets all the Slytherin fourth year lads round at his place over the summer to watch it. The girls have been known to go quite a bit as well. I wouldn't mind going myself, I've seen Marlie's collection and it's a brilliant show... ah." He stopped, realising he'd just let his secret slip. Snape wasn't saying anything, but the knowing look on his face was unmistakable.

"Go on, Malfoy." he coaxed. "You were saying you've seen Marlene Lovegood's video collection. Which, unless she's now transported the delights of television to the Serpents' Nest, means you've been to her house, haven't you?"

"Don't tell my parents. Please!" Draco begged. "Father would kill me, or worse, disown me, if he knew! And Mother would be so disappointed in me. It'd break her heart. Please!"

"Don't fret, Malfoy." Snape reassured him. "I won't say a word, although I think you underestimate your mother's fortitude and love for you. Nevertheless, you have your father's reaction down perfectly, so I will say nothing. Besides, I already knew."

"You... knew?" Draco blinked. "But... how?"

"You didn't exactly keep your presence a secret, boy. You met Mr. Lovegood on your first day there, and he saw no reason not to tell his wife. Your aunt Melissa has known for some time, however she's chosen not to act on it. I think she's too fond of the idea of subverting Lucius Malfoy's son to stop matters." Snape leaned back, unable to resist smirking just a little. "But back to you. You were saying you'd started to feel a liking for your cousin Marlene."

"Yeah." said Draco, more than a little deflated that his secret visits to the Lovegoods weren't that secret after all. "I was feeling bored last summer, suffering severe Manics withdrawal symptoms, so I decided to pay Marls a visit, knowing she was the one who hated me the least. The first few times, she got the house-elf to kick me out, but eventually I was able to worm my way in, and we got to know each other. And we hit it off really well! We did all sorts! You know, it was the best summer I've ever had?" Draco's previous low mood dissipated in the face of remembered enthusiasm. "I borrowed some of her brother's clothes, and we went out shopping. Marls would change some money for me at Gringotts, and away we'd go. We went shopping, sightseeing, the works. Most of the time, we just went to Exeter or Chudley, or just stayed at her place. She took me to London once, but we didn't stay long. Traffic fumes got to me, and there's so many people!" Draco shuddered at the thought. "I mean, I'll go again, sure, but it was one hell of a shock."

"I can imagine." murmured Snape soothingly, well remembering his first visit to London, as a pure-blood Northern country boy with very little experience of any towns whatsoever and a very sheltered upbringing. He'd not been much older than Draco was now, and despite Lily Evans's reassuring presence, had been more than a little overwhelmed by it all. Luckily, Caitlin had felt the same, so they'd retreated to one of the parks to get away from it all. "Here's a tip - get out of the West End as soon as possible. Ask Marlene to take you to one of the parks, or Primrose Hill. Then work up to Camden Lock and the South Bank. Then, and only then, should you brave Oxford Street, and under no circumstances should you venture there during the month of December. Camden Lock is also to be avoided at weekends."

"Thanks, I'll remember that." Draco's face fell. "That is, if I ever get to go there again. Marls won't talk to me, and I don't blame her. She virtually adopts me as a younger brother, and what do I do? Double-cross her not once but twice. Some friend I am."

Snape was regarding him extremely thoughtfully. "Hmm. Interesting. So why did you double-cross her then, if you regarded her as a friend?"

Draco shrugged. "Didn't have a lot of choice. She'd already been sacked as Seeker, and I'd spent most of the last year foolishly whining to Father about how it wasn't fair Potter had been picked for his team when I hadn't. So he went and bought seven Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones and gave them to the team on condition they took me on. Without telling me until the deal had been done. What was I supposed to do, turn round and say I didn't want it after all? He'd have hit the roof."

"I can well believe it." Snape agreed, knowing all too well what Lucius Malfoy was capable of, even towards his own son. "Go on."

"So I had to play along. Even when I didn't want to." Draco sighed. "And after a while, I started to believe it too. Started to believe the summer hadn't meant a thing and Marls was just my half-blood mutt cousin. But deep down, I knew it wasn't true. And it all came flooding back after Martin left. Marls slapped me in front of everyone and yelled at me. And I realised then what I'd done."

"But you must have known she wouldn't like you getting a friend of hers expelled." Snape interjected. "So why'd you do it?"

Draco shrugged. "Don't know. Peer pressure, I guess. Pansy, Crabbe, Goyle, they were hell bent on getting Tyler back, have been since day one. And I wasn't about to stand in their way. Besides, she's a Tal-y-Rhys and I wanted to get under her skin. So I went along with it. We couldn't do anything at first, but then she got found at the scene of the first attack, and then Pansy overheard her and Stormosi talking, and we had the idea she might be linked with the attacks in some way. Of course we still had nothing to go on. And then Weasley turned up with his little gift from the gods and it seemed too perfect to resist." Draco shook his head. "I am such a fool."

"*Boy, you can say that again!*" Corvus crowed.

"*Be quiet!*" Snape told the raven off, noting the look of suspicion Draco was giving the bird. "Well, Malfoy, at least you appear to have developed a conscience, which

wasn't something I ever thought I'd see in you. I can't stop you feeling guilty, nor can I mend your friendship with your cousin, although I hope for your sake it can be done. She's clearly a good influence on you."

"Thank you, sir." murmured Draco.

"No trouble, Malfoy." Snape gestured dismissively. "Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

"Not really, sir. I just wanted to know if there was anything else I can do."

"Probably not much. However you are on the right track, I believe. I heard about your little confrontation with the Clearwater twins."

"Oh that." Draco dismissed it. "It was nothing. I'm not having a couple of Ravenclaws passing judgement on us."

"Well, whatever your reasons, it was a very noble gesture..." he paused before allowing a smile to make the briefest of appearances, "and one that, politically speaking, couldn't have been faulted. Five points to Slytherin, Malfoy."

"I don't deserve them, you know." said Draco, smiling despite himself.

"You've never complained before." Snape observed.

"That was different." Draco got to his feet. "I'd better go. Better talk to Crabbe and Goyle about their Quidditch performance lately. Honestly, thrashed Ravenclaw reserves in the first match, and have barely won anything since. And please don't mention the Hufflepuff game." Draco shuddered. Despite the gifts of the Firebolts, Crabbe and Goyle had not improved their Quidditch performance in the slightest. In the end, thanks to Crabbe and Goyle failing to even try and protect their Chasers and Seeker, Hufflepuff had beaten them 240-nil. It had been a chilly Serpents' Nest that night.

"Ah yes, the Hufflepuff reserves game." Snape's eyes had taken on that cold luminosity that they always did when he was about to really lay into someone. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that. Draco Malfoy, if any Slytherin Quidditch team with one of your little crowd on it loses that badly again, I will personally make you wish you'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir." said Draco quickly. Snape might not be a big Quidditch fan, but no one cared about Slytherin's reputation more than he did.

"Excellent. Well, well, run along, Malfoy." Snape's anger had died away and now he just seemed bored. "Off you go, and don't get into any more trouble with Miss Tyler and friends. It's not generally considered a smart move."

"I won't." Draco promised. "You have my word."

Crabbe and Goyle looked up as Draco re-entered their dorm. They didn't say a word. Draco did not appear to be in the best of moods, and when Draco was angry, you stayed quiet and kept a low profile. However, Crabbe couldn't contain himself for long. They'd both witnessed Draco demanding Deanna talk with him, and Luella's parting words had haunted them as well as their leader. They hadn't needed to be told that Draco must have been trying to sue for mercy with Luella's universally acknowledged deputy.

"Well?" asked Crabbe as Draco flung himself on to his bed.

"Well what?" snapped Draco.

"Well, how did your little chat with Tyler go? You're alive, so it obviously couldn't have gone too badly."

"Oh that." shrugged Draco. "Well, had to get that wretched prophecy of Martin's lifted somehow. We talked, and negotiations proved interesting."

"Yeah? What happened?" asked Goyle, wondering how it was that Draco was still alive and apparently unharmed.

"What did she do to you?" asked Crabbe, full of morbid curiosity.

"Surprisingly little, although I won't say she was exactly merciful. However, I have some good news - she's not seeking revenge."

This threw them. This was not Slytherin behaviour. Not Slytherin at all.

"Blimey, Malfoy, what did you have to do to get that?" Goyle asked, bewildered.

"Yeah," said Crabbe, "she's had her heart set on nothing else since Martin left. What have you promised her, the entire Malfoy inheritance?"

"Not exactly." Here, Draco fixed them both with a steely gaze that made both of them begin to wonder if perhaps it wasn't Malfoy who'd agreed to serve punishment. "However, from this moment on, we are to stop fighting them. We don't have to befriend them, and to be honest, they'd rather we stayed well clear, but we are all to desist from acting maliciously against any of them. Got that boys?"

Crabbe and Goyle nodded. "OK."

"If that's what they want. After all, we've had revenge, I couldn't care less what they do." Crabbe looked at him curiously. "Is that it? Sounds a little lenient to me."

Draco just shrugged. "Tyler is not you. Apparently she's quite happy seeing us all tiptoeing around her in fear and submission. However, there is one thing, which I believe I mentioned before. Remember when you got the Firebolts?"

Goyle's expression changed into one of ecstatic bliss. "How could I forget?" he sighed.

Crabbe remained rather warier. "I remember. Go on."

"I remember telling you both to stop throwing games and start acting like proper Beaters."

Both of them had the grace to look ashamed.

"Oh. That."

"Sorry, boss."

"So you should be." Draco glared at them. "Well, it's not just Tyler who wants you to start behaving. Snape had a word with me too. He wasn't happy about that Hufflepuff game, lads. Not happy at all."

Both boys began to look ever shiftier. Draco continued.

"In fact, his exact words were that if a Slytherin team with you two on it ever lost that badly again, he'd make me wish I'd been Sorted into Hufflepuff."

Crabbe and Goyle both winced at this. Snape was obviously not going to take this lying down. Draco slipped off his bed and came to stand between them, an arm around each shoulder.

"Now, I'm not on the team and thus cannot control the match results. However, if Snape comes down hard on me as a result of anything you boys have done, I shall make damn sure that you two are dragged down with me. Understand?" His voice had gone ominously soft and his eyes were flicking dangerously from one to the other.

"Got it, Malfoy." croaked Crabbe, his throat hoarse with tension.

Goyle just nodded and whimpered. Draco got up and returned to his bed.

"Excellent. I trust we shall see better results next year, assuming Lovegood's not come to her senses and dropped you both." He began going through his trunk. "Now where is my quill, I have work to do, and let's face it, what with the last match of the year tomorrow, I'm not going to get much done then, am I?"

"It's just Gryffindor and Hufflepuff." said Goyle, confused. "What's the big deal about that?"

"Because, Goyle," Crabbe yawned, "Slytherin first team woefully underperformed this year which means our chances of winning hinge on the result. I blame that incompetent new Seeker myself. Bring back Lovegood, that's what I say."

"Shut up, Crabbe." snapped Draco. "That's rich anyway, coming from you, your family still maintain she should never have had the job in the first place."

Crabbe kept his face studiously neutral as he stared at the ceiling. "My family may not like it, but you can't deny it, the girl can play."

"But at least the first team didn't lose to Hufflepuff 240-nil." Draco pointed out.

This time, Crabbe turned to face him with an insolent grin. "And nor would we have done... if Goyle and I had played properly. A world of difference between being able to play and not trying, and trying but not being able to play."

"Well, next season, you'll be able to prove your point, won't you?" Draco retorted.
"Until then, shut up!" He reached into his trunk again to find some parchment... and found his fingers encircling a small, leather-bound book. Intrigued, he lifted it out and inspected it. It was Ginny's diary.

"What's that you got there, Malfoy?" asked Crabbe, noticing the book in Draco's hand.

"It's that diary that Tyler took off Harry." said Draco dismissively.

Crabbe and Goyle both sat bolt upright at this.

"Yeah? Anything in it?" asked Goyle, springing off his bed and coming to look over Draco's shoulder.

Draco shook his head. "No. Blank. Totally blank. See for yourself."

Goyle flicked through it before flinging it back at Draco, disappointed. "Oh. How boring. I'd hoped for something interesting." He returned to his bed.

Crabbe was still watching the book. "So what are you going to do with it then?"

Draco shrugged. "Better give it back, I suppose. Tyler was most annoyed when she discovered it was gone. She may as well have it if she wants it that much, I've got no use for it."

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Draco was as good as his word. The following morning, he raced straight over to Deanna as she was about to leave the Serpents' Nest for breakfast.

"Tyler, wait!" he shouted, chasing after her. She didn't wait for him.

"I've got nothing to say to you." she snapped as he ran up to her.

"That's OK, I just wanted to..." he started, but Deanna cut him off, rounding on him with a fury terrible to behold.

"You just don't get it, do you, Malfoy?" she snapped at him. "I want nothing to do with you! At all! Ever! I want you to stay away from me, stay out of my life, and stop bothering me!"

"But Tyler, I just want to..." Draco began. She was having none of it.

"I mean it, Malfoy!" she fumed. "Leave me alone!" With that, she turned and stormed off. Draco watched her go, frustrated.

"I just wanted to give you your diary back." he said softly, holding the small black book in front of him. He swore under his breath. So now what? Rianne and Marlie were nowhere in sight, and he didn't fancy trying to find their dorm either. However, on turning around, he saw the answer to his problems.

Ginny Weasley had just walked in, yawning and rubbing her eyes. Seizing his chance, he ran over to her.

"Ginny!" he smiled. "I've got something for you!"

"What?" she asked, still sleepy.

"This." he told her, and pushed the diary into her hands. Ginny seemed to wake up almost at once, staring at it in horror.

"No, I don't want it!" she cried, backing away.

"Well, nor do I." Draco said, rather irritated himself by now. "Take it, it's yours. No use to me, I never keep a diary. See you later, Gin." And before she could say another word, he was gone, leaving a horrified Ginny Weasley staring at the little black book in her hands.

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Chapter Twenty Five Another One Bites The Dust

It really was amazing what the prospect of first team Quidditch could accomplish. Marlie Lovegood was actually up, vertical, fully awake and dressed and at breakfast before Deanna Tyler. This was not a common event.

"Good gods." Deanna blinked. "You're up!" She looked at her watch. "Did I miss three hours or something?"

Marlie aimed a playful blow at her, which Deanna dodged with ease.

"No." she laughed. "But you'll miss the match if you don't hurry. Starts in fifteen minutes!"

Deanna looked at her watch again and shrieked. "Ack!" She turned to Marlie and Rianne. "Why didn't you two wake me up earlier? I'll never get a decent breakfast now! And who knows how long it could be until lunch??"

"Not long, if Harry's up to his usual standard." Rianne observed, causing Marlie to grimace. "Could be all over by noon."

"But we're hoping that won't happen, right?" Marlie chirped up. "Because we're hoping for a Hufflepuff win, right guys?"

The surrounding Slytherins unanimously failed to respond to her with anything but indifference. Marlie sagged, depressed at how bad the situation actually was.

"Dear gods, is this what it's come to? Having to support Hufflepuff to stand a chance at winning?" she sighed. "Slytherin, Slytherin, what's happened to you?"

"The decent Seeker got herself sacked and now her talentless rich brat cousin is going about merrily destroying any chance we might have had of winning?" suggested Rianne.

"Shut up." muttered Marlie. She turned to Deanna, who had transfigured her napkin into a paper plate and was even now piling it high with toast and croissants. "Tyler what are you doing?"

"Take-away breakfast." came the crisp reply. "Pass me those spare serviettes, Ri. Thank you." A wave of her wand later and a paper bag had appeared to go with the plate. Soon, Deanna was ready to go.

"Right. I'm sorted for food. Shall we get a move on?" She got to her feet. "I want to get some halfway decent seats."

"Us?" Rianne joined her. "We've been ready ages. We were just waiting for you." She gave Deanna a very pointed look before moving off towards the exit. Deanna turned to Marlie.

"You coming, Marls?"

"In a minute." Marlie took a last bite of toast. "I'm going to have a look for Ginny, see if her crowd want to watch the match with us. You go on ahead. Save me a seat."

"Will do. See you later." She headed off, leaving Marlie scanning the table for a sign of Ginny. She wasn't there, but Lydia and Autumn were chatting not far away. Marlie went over to them.

"Seen Ginny lately?" she asked.

"In the dorm still." Lydia replied. She was looking ever so slightly worried. "Marls, do you think she's OK?"

Marlie frowned. Earlier on in the year, she herself would have had doubts of her own, but just recently, Ginny had seemed perfectly normal.

"Seems fine to me. Why, is there something wrong?"

Lydia and Autumn exchanged worried glances.

"Maybe." said Autumn evasively. "But on the other hand, it could be nothing." she added, not wanting to worry Marlie unnecessarily.

"Nothing or not, if something's up with Ginny, I want to know about it." said Marlie firmly, trying to ignore the sudden burning sensation in her necklace and the voice of her dark twin whispering in her ear that Lydia and Autumn's suspicions were not unfounded. "What's up?"

"We think Malfoy might be bullying her." said Lydia softly.

"Yeah." Autumn nodded. "He was talking to her in the common room as we were coming to breakfast, but left as soon as we arrived. When we asked her what he wanted, she refused to tell us and said she had to go to the dorm, she wasn't well. She looked horrible too, really pale, shaking all over. I said what about the match, but she just glared at me and hissed that there were more important things than Quidditch." She shivered at the memory of just how her friend had seemed at that moment, totally alien and if she hadn't known better, practically malevolent, as if she'd been possessed by some loathsome demon.

"Then I asked if she was OK and if she wanted us to take her to the hospital wing, and she nearly bit my head off, saying she'd be fine if people just left her alone." said Lydia. "She looked really strange too, with this weird look in her eyes. In fact her eyes looked almost as if they were a different colour, green or blue or something, but it could just have been the light..." Her voice trailed off.

"The eyes might have been the light but that voice was real enough." Autumn shuddered. "Gods, but she sounded almost like a bloke, really harsh and nasty, and deeper than normal too. I swear, Marls, she looked possessed. I don't know if

Malfoy's done something or what, but she is not her normal self. We think you should have words - Malfoy likes you guys. He might listen to you."

Marlie fingered her necklace, the horrible nagging feeling at the back of her mind getting worse and worse by the second. And yet, despise her cousin as she did, the memory of the summer lingered on. He might be sarcastic, nasty and untrustworthy, but he wasn't the type to use Dark Magic on other students. Not his style at all. Unbidden, another thought came to her, of something else that inspired fear among all who laid eyes on it. Something that could be more than capable of ensnaring the unwary. Something that bore a marked resemblance to an object she'd seen Ginny scribbling in at the beginning of the year, a small, secret diary that Ginny had refused to let her anywhere near.

"Autumn," she began, "when you saw Ginny last, she wasn't carrying anything, was she?"

"Like what?" asked Autumn.

"Like, a small black book?" Marlie bit her lip, praying that she was wrong.

"I don't think so..." Autumn started, but Lydia cut her short.

"Oh yes she was. She had that little diary of hers in her hands. That's why I thought Malfoy might be bullying her, I wondered if he'd taken it and been blackmailing her, if he'd made her do something for him to earn it back." Lydia stopped, seeing Marlie's expression turn from concern to one of horror. "Marlie? What is it?"

"This diary of hers?" Marlie choked. "She's had it all year? And it's definitely a small black book?"

Lydia nodded. "Yeah. It's her secret diary. She's very possessive over it, used to write in it all the time, although I've not seen her use it lately. In fact, this morning is the first time I've seen her with it in ages, which is why I thought Malfoy might have taken it. Why, what's up?"

Marlie was by this time close to collapsing. Please, she prayed, please don't let this diary of Gin's be the one Deanna took off Harry, please. Only one way to find out.

"She's in the dorm, yes?"

"That's right." Autumn nodded.

"Right. I'm going to find her. You two run along to the match, stay together and don't go wandering off on your own, stay where there's people. Understand?"

The two first years nodded, confused.

"OK, but why?" asked Lydia.

Marlie shook her head. "No time to explain. I have to talk to Ginny and quickly. See you both later!" With that, she dashed off.

Autumn turned to Lydia "Do you reckon we did the right thing, telling her all that? She looked awfully worried."

Lydia nodded. "Gods, yeah. If Marls is that worried, then something must be up, and we could hardly let Ginny deal with it on her own."

Autumn didn't seem convinced. "I don't know. I'm worried about Marlie now too. Do you think she'll be able to manage it?"

"Course she will. She has Tyler on her side." Lydia took Autumn by the arm. "Come on. Let's go. The match'll be kicking off soon." The two first years left the room.

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Marlie raced across the Great Hall, panic beginning to well and truly set in. A memory of February came back to her, of Luella also saying she had to talk to Ginny and racing off. Had she realised the truth as well? Maybe, maybe not. If she'd guessed the whole truth, she'd have certainly told them, or said something to Snape. Not even finding Penelope Clearwater petrified would have made her forget that in a hurry, surely? But she must have guessed something. Marlie was ready to kick herself. If only the whole expulsion thing hadn't got in the way, Lu might have been able to get the truth out of Ginny and sort the whole thing out. For Ginny must surely have been the diary thief. She knew how Deanna's locking charms worked, she knew which tunes they used to lock the dorm up with, she'd known they had the diary, she could easily have eavesdropped on them. Marlie would have been ready to kill her, had she not been terrified for the poor girl. She'd had Voldemort's diary with her all year, been writing in it, pouring out her soul to gods knew what all that time? Marlie remembered one of her mother's sayings, that if you stared into the abyss long enough, the abyss started staring back into you. She'd always wondered what it meant, and now she knew. Voldemort must have been using her for who knew how long to cause the attacks. Since Halloween at least. Marlie shuddered to think what Ginny must have been going through. Must have made Sleeping Death look like a child's tea party. At least with Sleeping Death, you knew what you were up against. With a Sleeping Death trance, you had the advantage of knowing that at least the demons you met were your own.

She skidded to a halt as she heard voices up ahead, immediately recognising Hermione as one of them.

"Harry - I think I've just understood something! I've got to go to the library!"

This was followed by the sound of someone racing upstairs, presumably Hermione on her way to the library. Marlie emerged into the Entrance Hall proper to see Harry standing there, looking up the stairs in confusion.

"Where's she off to?" Marlie asked.

"The library." said Harry, distracted. "She thinks she might know something about what was causing the attacks."

This got Marlie's attention straight away. Maybe Ginny could wait. If Hermione was on to something too, maybe it was time they teamed up.

"Yeah? Like what?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know." He lowered his voice. "Listen, Marls, can I tell you something?"

"Go on." Marlie nodded.

"OK then. I could hear this voice in the walls, wanting to kill something. It's not the first time I've heard it either. And last time I heard it, well..." here he paused for breath. "Last time I heard it there was an attack. And that's what inspired Hermione. See, only I can hear it, no one else can. She seems to think that's important."

Marlie just gazed at him in mounting horror. Oh my god, the monster's on the loose now... And then another thought, one uncharacteristically selfless for someone as Slytherin as Marlie.

"And you just let her go, did you?"

"Well yeah." said Harry. "No sense stopping her when she gets one of her ideas - besides, when she's on to something, she's usually right."

"I see." said Marlie levelly. "So, you just let your best mate go running off on her own, did you? While there's the possibility of a crazed Heir of Slytherin and an incredibly dangerous monster roaming the school. Your *Muggle-born* best mate?"

She watched as Harry went pale, the implications dawning on him. "Oh my god, *Hermione!*" he yelled, turning to run after her. Marlie grabbed his arm.

"Harry, wait! You've got a Quidditch match about to start." For the briefest of moments, Marlie toyed with the idea of taking him with her, causing him to miss the match and forcing Gryffindor to default, but her ethical self, in astonishingly top form today, overruled her. Besides, if Slytherin lost, all the more reason for them to beg her to return... "You go, get yourself out there. I'll look for Hermione."

"But you're half-blood, you're not safe either." Harry whispered. Marlie cut him off.

"One mage parent is better than none." She drew her wand. "And you're talking to someone who can beat Deanna Tyler in a fight. I'll be alright. Don't worry." And with that, she raced off towards the library.

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Marlie arrived at the library just as Hermione was dashing out, a piece of paper clutched in her hand and an exhilarated look on her face.

"Marlie, I've found it!" she breathed. "I know how they're doing the attacks!"

Marlie just nodded grimly. "Yeah. And I know who. But what the hell are you doing up here on your own? If Harry heard that voice again, that means the attacker's probably on the loose right now! Hermione, do you have **any** concern for your own safety?"

"Doesn't matter!" Hermione grinned. "I know how to get past the monster! Take a look at this!" She thrust the parchment in her hand at Marlie.

Marlie scanned it, feeling her heart shoot up into her throat and the bottom fall out of her stomach, now mortally afraid. It was a page from *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*. And the monster it described was none other than the Basilisk.

"Oh my god." whispered Marlie. "A Basilisk? Are you sure?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course. That's why Harry can hear it, and no one else can - he's a Parselmouth. It kills by looking at people, but no one's died because no one's looked it in the eye. Colin saw it through his camera, Mrs. Norris saw it reflected in the water on the floor, Justin saw it through Nearly Headless Nick - Nick got the full blast but he couldn't die *again* - but I don't know how to account for Penelope yet."

"Glasses." Marlie whispered. "She was cleaning her glasses at the time, must have seen it in the lenses." She shut her eyes, remembering the climax of her Sleeping Death trance, being chased around an underground vault by a Basilisk controlled by Voldemort. A vault which she realised must have been the Chamber of Secrets. She could have slapped herself for being so blind - deep down, she'd known all along. She never thought it would happen in real life though. That time, it had just been a dream. The Basilisk had bitten Deanna, but she'd survived thanks to Snape and Caitlin pulling her back to her own body. There'd be no such escape route this time. She grabbed Hermione by the wrist.

"Come on." she breathed. "We have to get out of here, and fast! It could be anywhere."

"OK." said Hermione. "But we'll be fine, I know how stay out of trouble. Got a mirror?"

"Of course I've got a mirror." Marlie snapped as she fished in her bag for the little hand mirror she always carried for hair and make-up emergencies. "Here."

"Keep it." Hermione told her. "You need to use it to see around corners before you turn them, so you can tell if the Heir's there or not." Something occurred to her. "Did you say you knew who it was?"

"Yeah." Marlie nodded. "Remember Riddle's diary?"

"Of course." Hermione replied. "It told us it was Hagrid."

"Do you believe that?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so, I mean I know he's fond of monsters, but he's not the type to keep something that was attacking students. Is it him?"

"Of course not!" snapped Marlie. "Hermione, that diary is not what it seems. Don't believe it, don't trust it, don't have anything to do with it unless you have to. Why do you think Deanna took it off Harry? She knows who Riddle really is."

"Who is he?" asked Hermione, curious and yet beginning to look just a little anxious.

"Voldemort." said Marlie quietly and watched in satisfaction as Hermione went pale and clapped her hands to her face.

"You-Know-Who, oh my god!" she gasped. "You mean... that diary... is causing the attacks?"

Marlie nodded. "Yeah. It fell into the hands of someone who didn't know what it was, and it took them over, used them to open the Chamber. The school was safe while we had it, but it got stolen from our dorm, and now the one who had it first has it back. Which means we've got to get out of here."

Hermione was still trying to take it all in. "But who...?" she whispered. "Who is it?"

Marlie was about to respond when a sudden flash of red caught her eye. Slowly, she lifted her eyes to see a small, black-clad, red-haired figure standing in the corridor just ahead of them.

"Ginny."

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Hermione turned round and smiled to see Ginny standing there. "Ginny! There you are! Ron didn't see you at breakfast, he was getting worried. Come on, we have to get moving, the Heir of Slytherin's loose and could attack at any moment."

Ginny stood there, unmoving, with a rather cryptic smile on her face.

"Yes." she said. "I know."

"So, we'd better go then." said Hermione, just a little worried by Ginny's apparent calmness. "In case the monster turns up."

"It won't." said Ginny, still with that same deathly certainty. "Not unless it's called."

Hermione may not have been the most sensitive girl in the school, but she had no trouble working out that something was wrong.

"Ginny? What's up?" she started to ask, but a touch on her arm from Marlie stopped her.

"Hermione," said Marlie softly, "when I said her name just now, I wasn't addressing her. I was answering your previous question."

Hermione gasped in shock, realising in a flash what Marlie meant. Marlie, meanwhile, turned to meet Ginny's eyes, steeling herself for what needed to be said.

"Ginny," she smiled, doing her best to hide her nervousness. "It's alright. You can trust us."

"Trust you?" This time, Ginny laughed, a cold, hard laugh that really didn't suit her. "Yes, you are both so very trustworthy, aren't you? Trustworthy, reliable, oh-so predictable." She shook her head. "You know, Marlene, you really didn't need to die. If you'd just acted like a proper Slytherin and let Harry come after Miss Granger here, you could have avoided all this. Ah well. Too late now. You always did have this strange ethical streak - must have inherited it from that filthy Muggle father of yours."

Marlie's face twisted into a snarl, but she controlled herself. "Riddle, let her go. Let her go now, and we'll say no more about it."

The malevolent force that had taken over Ginny Weasley burst out laughing at this.

"And what are you going to do about it, half-blood? Last time you faced my little pet, you fled stumbling from it, you and your allegedly mighty warrior friend the Tal-y-Rhys Heiress Deanna."

"What's he talking about, Marlie?" Hermione whispered.

Marlie just faced the possessed Ginny, lifting her necklace with the fingers of her left hand. "A dream I once had." She took a step forward. "I was only twelve and I still defeated you. I say to you now, you will not find me an easy target. Now. Let... her... go!" She stepped right up to Ginny, thrusting the necklace in her face.

Ginny/Riddle hissed in fury, backing away. "You..." she snarled. "Well, it won't help you! Look behind you!"

Marlie dropped the necklace, and turned, but was stopped by Hermione.

"No!" she cried. "He's trying to trick you. Use the mirror!"

Marlie nodded, and flipped out the mirror, holding it up so she could see the corridor behind her. Hermione peered over her shoulder as they both looked into the small hand-mirror. And saw...

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Back at the Quidditch pitch, the atmosphere was veritably buzzing in anticipation. The Gryffindors were practically jubilant. The Slytherins looked on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The Hufflepuffs looked almost pained with the agony of wanting to win and yet knowing that a win for them would give the trophy to Slytherin. Even

the Ravenclaws looked interested. It looked like it was going to be a good match for all concerned.

Rianne and Deanna were taking their seats towards the back, with an unrivalled view of the action. It was a strange but bizarre phenomenon that no matter how many Slytherins turned out for any given Quidditch match, there were always enough seats with a decent view when Deanna and her friends wanted to sit somewhere.

But before they could sit down, they were approached by Ron.

"I say, you two haven't seen Ginny have you?" he asked nervously.

Both girls shook their heads. "Haven't seen her all morning." Rianne told him.

Ron bit his lip. "No. Nor have I. She just said she'd watch the match with me if I liked, and she's usually on time. I was starting to worry about her, that's all."

"Marlie said she was going to look for her." Deanna volunteered. "I wouldn't worry, Ron, Marls'll find her. And you know what she's like with timekeeping. They'll probably roll up eventually."

"I hope so." said Ron quietly. "I just don't like the idea of her off on her own, not when the school's like this."

Deanna opened her mouth to say that there might not have been any danger if he hadn't got Luella expelled, but Rianne guessed what she was thinking and nudged her sharply to keep quiet.

"Well, I'm sure she'll turn up." Rianne reassured him. "Marlie'll look after her, I'm sure."

"Hope so. Well, I'd better get back to the Gryffindor end. This lot look about ready to lynch me." He indicated some nearby Slytherins, all of whom were glaring at him.
"See you later."

Ron had only just gone, and Rianne and Deanna had only just taken their seats, when Lydia and Autumn turned up.

"No Ginny?" asked Rianne, raising an eyebrow. The three first years were normally inseparable.

Lydia shook her head, troubled. "No. She wasn't well. Listen, Deanna, can I ask you something?"

"What?" asked Deanna, watching as the two first years sat next to her.

"It's about Ginny..." Lydia began.

"And Malfoy." Autumn added.

"What about them?" snapped Deanna. "I don't like the way you linked their names there."

"They're not an item are they?" Rianne asked, trying not to grin.

Both girls shook their heads.

"Oh no."

"Nothing like that."

"Just we think, well." Lydia took a deep breath. "We think he might be picking on her."

"Is he now." Deanna gripped her wand, her eyes automatically shifting to Draco, sitting a few rows ahead of them. "We'll see about that."

"Of course, it's only a suspicion." said Lydia hastily.

"Yeah, we're not entirely certain." added Autumn. "So, er, don't go running after him or anything, because we might be wrong."

Deanna put her wand away, turning to Rianne. "Well? What do you think?"

Rianne was frowning, looking rather puzzled. "Malfoy? Picking on Ginny? Well, he could be, but..." She shook her head. "Doesn't make sense. If anything, Malfoy's been keeping a very low profile of late, he's not been swaggering around like he usually does. And Ginny's seemed completely happy and at ease. She doesn't seem like she's being picked on."

"Well, we didn't think she was either." said Lydia. "We just saw them talking this morning, that's all, and Ginny seemed out of sorts afterwards."

Deanna nodded. "Hmm. Tell you what, we'll all keep an eye on them both and if anything untoward happens, we'll step in and have a word. OK?"

Lydia and Autumn agreed, relieved that they had help in dealing with Ginny's recent weirdness. However, they didn't have a chance to say anything else. They were all distracted by the sight of Professor McGonagall striding on to the pitch, megaphone in hand.

"This match has been cancelled."

Rianne and Deanna looked at each other.

"Cancelled? What's she on about, cancelled? It can't be!" Deanna stared in disbelief.

"Marlie's not going to like this." said Rianne. She looked around. "Say, where is Marlie anyway?"

Deanna looked around. No Marlie. She turned to Lydia.

"Have you seen Marlie? She hardly ever misses Quidditch."

"Yeah, she was heading back to the dorm to find Ginny. But she surely must be on her way back by now." said Lydia, frowning.

Deanna turned back to Rianne.

"I don't like this. I don't like this at all. Rianne?"

Rianne was biting her lip, suddenly looking unaccountably worried.

"I think," she said deliberately, "that we had better go and talk to Professor Snape. McGonagall of all people does not cancel Quidditch matches without a very good reason, not when Gryffindor need to win to get the trophy." She got up. "Come on."

Lydia and Autumn got up to follow them, but Rianne stopped them.

"Not you. You two stay here, I've a feeling this could be dangerous. Stay with the crowd, OK?"

The two first years sulked but did as they were told. They knew enough not to argue with Rianne Stormosi.

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The two girls fought their way through the ranks of muttering students, trying to make their way towards Professor Snape, who had just strode out to talk to Professor McGonagall. Oddly enough, the Slytherins didn't seem too bothered, and a few were even jubilant.

"Look at it this way," Rianne heard her sister's voice saying excitedly, "if the match is cancelled, that means the tournament's off, right? Which means we get to keep the Quidditch Cup!"

"I'd rather have won it properly." Mike Lovegood was heard muttering.

"Yeah, but at least we didn't lose!" Kat urged.

Rianne didn't catch any more of the conversation. She was too busy trying to keep up with Deanna, who was forcing her way through the crowds, determined to get an explanation. Professor McGonagall had just given out another announcement to the effect that all students were to return to their common rooms where the Heads of Houses would instruct them. This was getting worse by the second.

Snape was engaged in a hushed, tense conversation with the Gryffindor House Head. He seemed as stunned as the rest of them.

"Not one of mine, Minerva, it can't be!" he was protesting.

"I'm sorry, Severus." she replied gently. "But there's no doubt." McGonagall shook her head, deeply grieved. "The poor, poor girl and after all that business in her first year too."

Snape was hanging his head. "Her mother isn't going to like this. Still, at least we are certain of reviving her this time."

Reviving? Business in the first year? A Slytherin girl? Rianne looked around and realised with a jolt which Slytherin girl was nowhere in sight... and a half-blood too. Oh gods...

Deanna had by this time reached Snape.

"Sir, what's going on?" she demanded. "Why's the match off?"

Snape turned to her, and the look in his eyes did nothing to allay Rianne's fears. He was gazing tenderly at her, his usual coldness gone.

"Deanna." he said softly. "I think you'd better come with me. You too, Miss Stormosi. There's been another attack."

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They followed him in silence through the deserted school. Snape, confirming Rianne's worst fears, had asked Mike Lovegood to come along too. Oddly enough though, Professor McGonagall was there too, with Harry Potter, still in his Quidditch robes, and Ron Weasley behind her. Rianne couldn't even begin to work out what they were doing there, unless... A horrible thought occurred to her, that maybe Marlie wasn't the only victim, that maybe another unaccounted-for Slytherin had been attacked as well. But if that was so and Ginny was Petrified too, why had Harry been invited along, and not the twins or Percy?

At length they arrived at the hospital wing. Snape opened the door to reveal two frozen figures lying on beds. One was Hermione Granger, who Harry and Ron immediately rushed over to, Ron stunned that this had happened to his friend, Harry burying his head in his hands, seemingly overcome.

There was no mistaking the other though. For Rianne and Deanna, this was a sight that was all too familiar. Stretched out on the bed next to Hermione, blonde hair cascading around her, was the prone form of Marlie Lovegood.

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"Marls!" Deanna yelled, rushing over to her friend. She knelt by the bed, staring numbly at the fallen Slytherin, unable to believe that this had happened to a friend of hers. Rianne joined her, placing an arm around her shoulders, silence saying more than words ever could.

Whereas Mike Lovegood came and stood on the other side, leaning over his sister with a strangely emotionless look on his face. Without a word, he stroked her hair.

"Not again, Marls!" he murmured softly, before turning to Professor Snape. "You will be able to revive her, won't you?"

Snape nodded. "Oh, of course. As soon as those Mandrakes are ready, I can have the potion brewed within days. She'll be fine."

Mike nodded, reassured. "That's all I wanted to know. Thank you, sir." Kneeling down, he turned his attention to Deanna, watching her unblinkingly until she had no option but to acknowledge his presence.

"What?" she snapped at him.

"Well?" was all he said.

"Well what?"

"Last time, you were the one to avenge her. Going to repeat yourself?" Still that unmoving gaze.

Deanna shifted uneasily, rattled by the assumption that it was her job to do something about it, still in shock, and further struck by how impossible the task seemed.

"Maybe. Maybe not. What you are forgetting, Mike Lovegood, is that last time, I actually had the faintest idea who it was! This time I have no idea. It really could be anyone."

"That so?" Mike didn't seem to believe her. "Well, whether that's true or not, you guys seem to know more than the rest of us. I refuse to believe you don't have any leads." He got up. "I'll leave it with you. See you later, Deanna. You too, Rianne." He moved away, leaving Deanna and Rianne alone with their feelings.

"You little fool, Marlie." Deanna whispered. "Why didn't you come to the match with us? What were you thinking of?"

Rianne tried to comfort her. "Don't blame her, Deanna. There's not been any attacks since Lu left, she probably thought she was safe."

"Suppose." sighed Deanna, who had to admit she'd not been walking around the school in fear of an attack either lately. She turned to Snape. "Where did they find her? In the Slytherin Corridor, I suppose."

Snape shook his head. "Actually, no. The two girls were found together, just outside the library."

"The library??" Both girls stared in disbelief.

"What, Marlie?" asked Deanna.

"Near the library?" said Rianne, wondering if she'd heard him right.

"When there's a Quidditch match on?" And there Deanna had thought this morning couldn't have got any stranger.

Snape nodded. "Oh yes. Virtually right outside it. And another thing. I don't suppose either of you know anything about this?" He produced a small, round, silver object which Deanna had no trouble recognising.

"Marlie's little handmirror. She's always got it with her. Must have fallen out of her bag."

"Indeed." said Snape dryly. "However, that fails to explain why Miss Lovegood was clutching it as if her life depended on it."

Maybe it did, the thought came to Rianne. She turned back to face Marlie. And realised something else.

From time to time, Sight actually came in useful. A moment later, and Rianne had seen the faces of the other victims, as if she'd been first on the scene. Creevey, Finch-Fletchley, and a half-remembered view of Penny Clearwater vividly brought to life. Three faces, each frozen in a rictus of terror. But not Marlie's. Marlie's by contrast spoke not of fear, but rather a cool, controlled anger and a determination to see this through. Almost as if she'd known...

"You knew." Rianne whispered, half to herself. "You knew what you were about to face." Again, she had to wonder about that mirror. Had Marlie used it in an attempt to defend herself? She looked over at Hermione. She didn't look frightened either. More... curious.

Rianne went over all this in her mind. Near the library. Found together. Hermione was certainly smart enough to have worked out what the monster could be, could have just worked it out after looking something up, have run out of the library, met Marlie and told her what she'd discovered. But why was Marlie there at all? It didn't make sense, Lydia had said she'd been looking for Ginny. Unless she hadn't found Ginny in the dorm and gone to the library instead looking for her.

She tugged at Deanna's sleeve. "We really have to talk." she murmured in her ear.

Deanna nodded. "Agreed. But just one thing." She reached out to Marlie's neck and unfastened the clasp on her necklace. "I'm not leaving this up here where anyone could get at it." She put the necklace around her own neck before hunting around for the rest of Marlie's stuff.

"I'll escort you back to the common room then." said Snape.

"In a minute." Deanna looked over to where Harry and Ron were both staring at Hermione. "There's something else I need to do first."

Unlike the Slytherins, Harry and Ron hadn't been thinking of revenge, or calculating how the attack had happened, but what had passed between them had been no less significant.

Harry had raced to Hermione's side, head in his hands.

"Hermione, no!" he'd groaned, mentally kicking himself. "Not you, not you, please!"

Ron had come up behind him and patted his shoulder, trying to comfort his friend.

"Harry, don't." Ron whispered. "It's alright. She'll be OK. She's not dead, they can revive her."

Harry shook his head, a lump in his throat. "No it's not!" he whispered, trying to hold back tears. "Ron, I heard that voice again! And... and I let her go off on her own! My Muggle-born friend, on her own with the Heir of Slytherin loose! Marlie told me I was a fool, and she was right! In fact, I'm a fool twice over, for letting Hermione go, and for letting a half-blood go after her! Should have been me there, not those two. It should have been me!" He pounded the bed in a mixture of grief and fury at himself.

"Wasn't your fault, Harry!" Ron whispered desperately. "You know what Hermione's like, when she gets an idea in her head there's no stopping her. And you try arguing with Lovegood. Not going to happen. Anyway, it's not your fault." Here, he too lowered his eyes. "It's mine."

"Eh?" Harry looked up sharply.

"It's my fault," said Ron simply. "For getting Luella expelled. If she'd been here, maybe she could have prevented this. Maybe she'd have caught the real Heir by now. She certainly would have had reason, they'd already got her cousin."

"Maybe. Or maybe not." There was very little warmth in Harry's voice, but none of the recent hostility either. Now he just seemed too drained to care. "Guess we'll never know. She's not here, no changing that now. Either way, I knew she wasn't here, so even more reason not to let Muggle-borns and half-bloods off on their own." He shook his head. "Let's face it, we're both idiots."

"At least you're not a petty and malicious idiot," said Ron softly.

"Even you've got your good points." Harry got to his feet, and looked Ron in the eye. While he didn't seem to be forgiven yet, nevertheless there was a definite change there, as if Harry was too drained to keep fighting. "Come on. Let's get going."

They were interrupted by the approach of Deanna Tyler.

"Hey, Tyler." Harry managed a weak smile.

"Tyler." Ron nodded. He remembered their last close encounter all too well, and felt his body tensing in fear of a repeat. But there was no hostility in the Slytherin now.

"Harry. Ron." Deanna was regarding them both surprisingly tenderly. "How are you both?"

"I've felt better," said Harry quietly.

"We'll get by." said Ron.

"Good, good." Deanna paused. "I just wanted to say sorry about Hermione." She shot a look back at Marlie before turning back to them. "I know how you feel."

"Thanks." whispered Harry, fighting the urge to burst into tears. Something in the Slytherin's gentle condolence and shared hurt touched him to the core. He composed himself. "I'm sorry about Marlie. I spoke to her before the attack, she told me I was nuts for letting Hermione go running off like that, and went after her. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't have it, reckoned she'd manage."

"Sounds like Marls." sighed Deanna. "Hermione too come to think of it. Don't blame yourself, Harry. Marlie's like an unstoppable force of nature sometimes. You could no more have prevented this than stopped a tsunami. In fact, you might have had more luck with the tsunami. Listen, they'll be OK." She reached out and took Harry by the shoulder. "They'll be revived soon. And when they are," here a cruel, cold look came into her eyes, "I'm going to find out who was responsible and teach them not to mess with Slytherins."

Ron shuddered at this. He knew all too well what Deanna was capable of. And yet, now it was directed at whoever had done this to Hermione, he found himself rather appreciating her way of dealing with enemies.

"Tyler," he began.

She turned to look at him, the icy anger in her eyes abating only slightly.

"What?"

"When you give the Heir of Slytherin a complete pasting..."

"Yes?"

"Can I give you a hand?"

She regarded him coolly for a few moments, evidently considering it. Then the coldness seemed to disappear as she began to smile just a little too widely.

"Sure. More the merrier. Come right along and join in the fun." She resumed the grieving friend demeanour. "Anyhow, I'd better leave you guys to it. Take care. See you later." She turned and rejoined her friends, before being led away by Professor Snape. Professor McGonagall approached the two boys.

"Come. I'll escort you back to Gryffindor Tower. I need to address the students in any case."

Harry and Ron assented without a word and let Professor McGonagall lead them away.

The rest of Slytherin House were no less shocked by the news.

"A Slytherin?" gasped Pansy Parkinson. "But... it can't be, the attacker's the Heir of Slytherin, they wouldn't attack one of us, surely!"

"Be that as it may." Each word of Professor Snape's fell from his lips like meltwater from an icicle, and had much the same psychological effects on the stunned Slytherins. "There has been another attack and one of our number was a victim."

At this, everyone began looking around, doing a mental roll-call and trying to figure out who it had been. It wasn't long before some of them realised just who it was. And Draco Malfoy was one of the first. Crabbe and Goyle of course hadn't left his side all morning, and Pansy wasn't easy to miss. Nor was Ginny, red hair standing out against the grey slabs of rock that formed the common room walls that all the Salvador Dali posters in the world couldn't make any less cell-like. Deanna and Rianne were there, keeping themselves to themselves, eyes downcast, looking like mourners. And then he looked for his cousin, expecting to see her alongside them... and didn't find her.

He looked up and locked eyes with his Head of House. "Sir... it's not... please tell me... It's not my cousin is it?"

Snape lowered his eyes, sadness confirming Draco's worst suspicions. "I'm sorry, Malfoy. It is indeed your cousin Miss Lovegood. She was found Petrified outside the library with the Gryffindor second year Hermione Granger."

Draco sank back in his chair, unprepared for the intensity of his reaction. *The Heir of Slytherin petrified my cousin! Bastard!* Then anger was followed by a rather different emotion, as it started to sink in that the self-titled Slytherin Sex Kitten, Provider of Pyrotechnics, Mistress of the Music Centre, his cousin, Marlie Lovegood, wasn't going to be around for a very long time. He screwed his eyes up in a mixture of rage, hate, pain and despairing impotence that the only son and heir of Lucius Malfoy could not have prevented this.

So it was that he only dimly heard Snape informing them that a six o'clock curfew was now in operation, that no one was to leave the common room without being accompanied by a teacher, and that all evening activities, including Quidditch, had been cancelled, before looking meaningfully at all of them and requesting that if any of them knew anything about who was causing the attacks, they should come forward. This last statement was accompanied by a particularly intense look at Deanna and Rianne, neither of whom met his eyes. Draco was too stricken to notice this but almost everyone else in the common room did. Including a rather intrigued Pansy.

So it was that when Snape had gone, she looked at Draco, now staring at his feet in sorrow and sheer, wretched despair, before turning to look at Rianne and Deanna, calm despite their evident sadness, then back to Draco again, and came to a decision. Beckoning Crabbe and Goyle over, she got to her feet.

"What are we doing, Pansy?" Goyle whispered.

"We're going to have words with the bereaved." came the response. "Draco's upset. I hate seeing Draco upset. Come on, boys."

Deanna, unable to rid herself of the memory of Marlie lying there so still and helpless, and also remembering an earlier memory of Marlie in the hospital wing, crying out and sobbing in a demented feverish sleep from which there could be no awakening, didn't hear the approaching footsteps. Nor did she see them immediately, absorbed as she was in holding Marlie's Snitch necklace in her hands, silently asking it why, as if it could give her any answers.

However, what she couldn't miss was the shadow that suddenly loomed over her, blotting out the fire light, extinguishing the gleam that seemed to light the Snitch from within. Slowly, she raised her eyes. And saw Pansy Parkinson standing there with her arms folded, Crabbe and Goyle flanking her.

Rianne had also noticed their arrival and was regarding them with mild suspicion.

"Shouldn't it be Malfoy in that particular pose?" she drawled lazily.

Pansy's eyes flashed fire at her. "Should be, yes. However, right now, he's not really in the mood." She unfolded her arms and planted both hands firmly on the table that Deanna and Rianne were sitting at. "Draco Malfoy is not happy. Not happy at all."

Deanna returned her attention to Marlie's necklace. "Pansy, go tell it to someone who cares."

"You will care. Believe me, you will." Pansy said softly, eyes flicking from one to the other. "For some reason that I can't work out for the life of me, he was actually rather fond of that cousin of his. He's not taking this very well. In fact, I'd go so far as to say he was miserable."

"Devastated." said Crabbe, now standing behind Deanna's shoulder, glaring at her.

"Depressed, even." Goyle threw in for good measure, positioning himself behind Rianne.

"And when Draco Malfoy's miserable, what happens, boys?" Pansy trilled, sliding into a nearby chair.

"All his friends get miserable too!" Crabbe and Goyle chorused.

"Exactly!" smiled Pansy. The skin-deep smile faded as soon as it had appeared. "To put it bluntly, Draco Malfoy is going to be a complete pain in the arse until she's back. And we want to know what you're going to do about it."

"What we're going to do about it?" Deanna raised an eyebrow, exchanging glances with Rianne. "And why is it our fault all of a sudden?"

"Don't play the innocent with me!" Pansy hissed, lowering her voice. "I saw the way Snape was looking at you two. You know far more than you're letting on about the

whole business, admit it! Your friend Luella didn't get expelled for no reason, did she? She knew more than she let on, and she must have let you in on the deal! So do something about it!"

"Do something about it, she says." Deanna leaned forward, her face mere inches from Pansy's, and her eyes now flashing with anger in their turn. The mention of Luella's name had that effect. "Lu didn't get expelled for no reason, she says. And we all know what that reason was, don't we? Because certain individuals decided it might be *fun* to frame her for something she didn't do! Didn't they?"

Pansy had the decency to look away at this, blushing furiously. Deanna continued remorselessly.

"And had those individuals not framed her, she'd still be here, wouldn't she. And *if* she'd still been here, there might not have been an attack. Mightn't there?"

Pansy had to admit that this was so.

"I admit we might have been a little hasty in getting rid of a possible Second Heir."

"So why'd you do it then?" Deanna was not letting this issue go in a hurry.

Pansy squirmed in her chair, well and truly on the spot. "We didn't think."

"There's a revelation for you." Rianne remarked. "Half-crazy and incredibly evil resurrected First Heir roaming the school letting a great, big, fanged thing loose on students, and this lot decide to get rid of possibly the one person who can stop them, and they say they didn't think. There's a shocker."

Crabbe spoke up, his voice unnaturally subdued. "What she means is, we didn't think they'd go for one of us."

"House loyalty and all that." Goyle added.

"Same house loyalty you showed so well when you got Luella kicked out?" said Rianne. The other Slytherins didn't answer. It was Deanna who took up the conversation.

"Well, you three can stop worrying. Don't worry, we're going to find out who did this and deal with them. But not for your sakes or that of your precious Draco." She sat back, glaring coldly at them. "We're doing this for Marls. Because she's our friend. And for Lu, because we need to clear her name too. And because we don't want any more attacks. For no other reason." She indicated with a flick of the head that this conversation was over. "Now go away."

Pansy didn't reply. Instead, she just got up and slinked off, Crabbe and Goyle following her. Deanna turned to Rianne.

"First Mike, then Snape, now her. Why does the whole of Slytherin House seem to think it's our job to do something about this?"

"Maybe because it is." Rianne got to her feet. "All year we've just been sitting here, watching all this unfold, not intervening, not doing anything, even when we had the Second Heir sitting right here next to us. We just let You-Know-Who carry on terrorising everyone and we did nothing. And now look what's happened. The fight's come right to our front door, and now we've lost Marls too. Well, no more." She indicated for Deanna to get up and follow her. "Come with me. We seriously need to talk."

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"So what did you have in mind?" Deanna asked as she sank onto her bed, watching Rianne pace up and down the dorm.

"She knew." came the crisp response. "Marlie knew what she was up against. Did you see her face? She wasn't scared. She was facing the Heir like a warrior. She knew who it was, she knew what that monster was too, I don't doubt. And Hermione, she wasn't scared either. Curious more than scared."

"Typical Gryffindor." remarked Deanna. "But how did Marls know? I mean, she'd have told us if she knew, surely?"

"That's what bothers me." frowned Rianne, flinging herself into a chair. "I mean, I'm sure she had no more idea than the rest of us this morning. And yet something happened, she found something out, and worked out what was going on."

"And got attacked. Wonderful timing you have there, Marls." sighed Deanna. Something else occurred to her. "Why was she near the library anyway? Doesn't make sense, she hardly ever goes there."

"Well, if she was looking for Ginny, she might have decided to try it." Rianne mused. "And didn't Harry say he'd run into Marlie, who'd yelled at him for letting Hermione go running off? If she'd met him before going to the common room, she might have changed her mind about Ginny and gone after Hermione instead. Went straight to the library, ran into Hermione and got attacked."

"While clutching a mirror." Deanna finished. "This just gets weirder, Ri."

"Maybe. Maybe not." Rianne said thoughtfully. "Maybe not if Hermione had been doing some research of her own. Maybe she'd worked it out and told Marlie. I'm sure that mirror's significant too, I think it was being used to ward off an attack somehow."

"Worked well there, didn't it?" Deanna remarked. "Honestly, Ri, what were they thinking of? Was the monster so hideously ugly they thought it'd drop dead at the sight of its own reflection?"

Rianne laughed at that. "It'd have to be pretty damned ugly for the mere sight of it to kill someone. We're talking Medusa-ugly here." She stopped smiling. Medusa, who could kill with a single look, and had snakes for hair, believed to be merely a legend, but a legend with some basis in fact. Because there was one monster who could indeed kill with a mere glance.

"Athene help us, Tyler, it's a sodding Basilisk."

"What?!" Deanna screamed, sitting bolt upright. "A Basilisk?? Ri, please. Tell me you're joking, please."

Rianne shook her head slowly. "I'm not. Think about it, why else would they need a mirror? So they could see round corners and not walk straight into it. That's why they're not dead, only Petrified, because they didn't see it directly. The mirror diluted the power."

"Which means all the others must have seen a reflection of it too." said Deanna. She snapped her fingers. "Penelope Clearwater was cleaning her glasses. She must have seen it reflected in the lenses."

Rianne nodded slowly. "And Mrs. Norris, wasn't she found next to a pool of water? She must have seen it reflected in that."

"But what about the other two?" Deanna asked. "How do we account for them?"

"That Hufflepuff kid was part of a double attack too." said Rianne, her mind coming alive with possibilities. "Except because the other victim was a ghost, no one remembers that. He must have seen it through Nearly Headless Nick."

"And Creevey?"

"Is never seen without his camera." Rianne finished. "First thing he'd have done would have been to take a picture of it. Don't you remember? His camera was found completely burnt-out with the film all melted. Probably saved his life."

"There's something to be said for geekiness after all." Deanna smiled thinly. "Mind you, Marlie's vanity saved hers - I wouldn't have had a mirror on me."

"Maybe now's the time to start then." Rianne tossed Marlie's mirror over to her. "Keep it with you, mate, we may need it again."

Deanna slipped it into her pocket. "Thanks." She shuddered, remembering her last encounter with a Basilisk. "Gods, Ri, a Basilisk? They're nearly impossible to fight, you can't even look at them! One false move, and you're gone. How on earth do we get rid of one of those? You'd need to be a Parselmouth to stand a chance."

Rianne sat back in her chair and gazed unblinkingly at her. "Then we had better get hold of one, hadn't we? When's the next Hogsmeade weekend?"

"Next week." replied Deanna. "That's if they don't cancel it."

"What with things as they are at the moment, Hogsmeade's probably safer than the school." Rianne observed. "I'll talk to Snape, persuade him to keep it on." She reached for a parchment and quill. "Secondly, we'll need to use Nestra."

"What on earth for?" asked Deanna, puzzled. "You're not sending her up against the Basilisk, I hope!"

"Of course not. I need to send a letter."

"Why, what are you planning now?" Deanna sat up, intrigued. She didn't know Rianne had any contacts with experience in snake-hunting. Unless...

"I'm doing what we should have done in the first place." Rianne paused, looking up from her letter. "I'm getting Lu back."

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Chapter Twenty Six Redeemer's Return

Luella, however, had rather more pressing concerns on her mind than an imminent return to Hogwarts. Like surviving.

"*Sanguinothermos*!"

The hex seemed to come from out of nowhere, hot on the heels of the one that had preceded it. A particularly nasty specimen, that. The Blood Boiling Curse which steadily raised one's internal body temperature. It was invariably fatal unless lifted in time, although it was normally used more as a means of torture than in a fight. However, it could also be blocked.

"Impedimenta Incantatem!"

A blue shield emerged from her wand, and deflected the incoming curse harmlessly into the wall before fading again. If only that block was more long lasting, Luella thought. Ah well. There were other methods of defending oneself.

Luella's opponent didn't hesitate. On seeing one hex diverted, she immediately hit back with another one.

"*Tarantellini!*!" This time, the curse was on target and Luella found herself dancing frenetically, in a dance that wouldn't stop even with the dancer's eventual death by exhaustion. Damn. Somehow, she didn't think Finite Incantatem would work on this one. She was done for. Unless... She pointed her wand at her legs.

"Locomotor Mortis!"

It worked. The two spells cancelled each other out and she was free again. However, that didn't get rid of the more immediate problem of her prowling, masked opponent, who hadn't let her guard down for a minute. It was no good just blocking her spells, she was too good for that and knew all sorts of things that Luella didn't have a hope of fighting. There had to be a way to defeat her. Had to be. And yet she surely knew all

the blocks, all the moves, to deflect anything Luella could do. If only Luella could think of some way of using her magic against her.

In a flash, Luella realised what she had to do. She needed to do exactly that, use her assailant's magic to do the work. And hadn't she recently learned one spell that would do exactly that?

"*Unificatio Incantatem!*" she cried, just as her opponent hurled a Tickling Charm at her. The charm hit Luella, causing her to fall to her knees, sobbing with laughter as the tickling sensation started... but it also had the same effect on her opponent, who was also bending double, managing to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Damn you, Luella, you little...! Alright, alright, you win, I surrender!" The counter-charm was sent Luella's way, and the laughing subsided from both of them. Finally, Luella's opponent removed her mask, and with a flick of her wand, turned the main lights back on.

Luella blinked, rubbing her eyes as a sense of normality began to return. There she was, in the Tylers' front room as if nothing had happened, with Caitlin stretched out in front of her getting her breath back.

"Not bad!" Caitlin gasped, leaning back on her elbows. "You learn quickly." Her eyes narrowed. "Too quickly. Wish I'd never taught you that Copycat Charm now." She shook her hair out. "How about you lift it now? I don't want my spells linked to yours for all eternity."

"Shame." smiled Luella. "It would have made my exams a lot easier, although I'm not sure how Professor Snape would react when I spontaneously started flinging Dark Hexes around his lesson."

"Badly, you know how he hates being upstaged." Caitlin yawned. "Well? You going to undo it yet?"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your hair on." Luella cast the severance spell and the bond between them dissolved. Caitlin smiled and got up, reaching out a hand to Luella.

"Alright then, I think that's enough for tonight. Well done, you did well there. Didn't lose your head, showed initiative, came up with some very good ideas. You're doing worryingly well in all this." She looked like she was appraising Luella carefully. "You do realise some of this is NEWT level stuff, don't you?"

"Is it?" Luella asked.

Caitlin nodded. "Oh yes." She smiled wryly. "Only some of it, mind you." She turned as an insistent ringing sound announced that they had visitors, frowning. "That's odd. Severus didn't say he was visiting tonight." She walked over to the mirror over the fireplace and tapped it with her wand. It filled with a pale blue mist, which parted to reveal the face of none other than Professor Dumbledore.

"Albus?" Caitlin asked, puzzled. "What are you doing here?"

"Good evening, Caitlin." said Dumbledore, with a smile that didn't hide the sadness in his eyes. "Can I come in? There's been some unexpected developments."

"Developments? What sort of developments?" This sounded rather ominous.

"Another attack." said Dumbledore quietly.

"Another...? Hades, Albus, who is it this time?" Caitlin noted the sadness in his eyes and felt her heart start pounding. "Is Deanna alright?"

This time, Dumbledore's smile was genuine. "No, she's fine."

"Thank the gods. But if Deanna's alright..." Caitlin shook her head, tapping the edge of the mirror again. "You'd better come in."

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"Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee?" Caitlin noted that Albus Dumbledore looked as if he'd hit his second century, never mind his first. "A very strong brandy?" she suggested.

Dumbledore allowed himself a smile at this. "No thank you, my dear. Tea will do just fine." He eased himself into an armchair as Caitlin sent Luella off to make the tea. "Unlike Severus, I've grown beyond the stage of using alcohol as a panacea for all my sorrows."

Caitlin knelt by his side, wondering what on earth was wrong with the old man. Yes, an attack was bad news, but he looked as if his entire world had caved in. She just hoped that it wasn't so, for Luella and Deanna's sake if no one else's.

"Albus," she began, "this attack. It wasn't fatal, was it?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. No, it wasn't. But the next one might be."

"What makes you say that?" asked Caitlin.

"Because, my dear, the attack may not have been fatal, but it's still had unforeseen consequences." sighed the old man. "And now I really have no idea what will happen next."

Caitlin sat back, her concern mounting. To see Dumbledore this depressed was not good news. Rarely did he admit to not knowing at all what to do.

Luella reappeared with a tray containing two cups of tea, a bowl of sugar, a plateful of chocolate biscuits and a can of fizzy apple juice. Placing the tray on the coffee table, she took the can and a couple of the biscuits and perched herself on the arm of the sofa.

"I didn't know how much sugar Professor Dumbledore takes so I thought I'd let you do your own." She regarded her Headmaster as if he were some new exhibit at the

Science Museum, clearly dying to know why he was here but not quite bold enough to ask.

"Thank you, Luella." Caitlin added two spoonfuls of sugar to her own cup before turning to Dumbledore. "Still just one, Albus?"

Dumbledore paused. "Actually, Caitlin, make it two."

Caitlin chuckled as she added the sugar. "You might not be dependent on alcohol but the old sweet tooth never went away, did it?"

"I'm a slave to my sweets, I admit it." the old man confessed, the familiar twinkle returning as he sipped his tea. "By the way, that's a very fast boiling kettle you have there, Caitlin."

Caitlin turned to Luella, who was blushing and looking ever so slightly uncomfortable. "I believe it had a little help from the Arts Magick, did it not, Luella?"

"Might have done." Luella admitted, pulling the sleeve of her shirt over her wrist to conceal the tip of the wand poking out.

Dumbledore chuckled approvingly. "Good to see you're not letting her talent go to waste, Caitlin." He turned serious again. "We may well have need of it sooner than you think."

"Yes, you haven't told me why you're here yet." said Caitlin. "So, who was attacked then? I take it they're Petrified like the rest then."

Dumbledore nodded. "That's right. However, this attack was different. There was not one but two victims."

"Who?" asked Luella in hushed tones.

"One was the Gryffindor second year Hermione Granger."

Luella shut her eyes as she inhaled. "Poor Harry." she whispered, before opening them again. "And the other?"

"The other was a member of Slytherin House."

That had both Luella and Caitlin's attention.

"A Slytherin? But the Heir wouldn't attack a fellow Slytherin, would he?" asked Luella in surprise before laughing at her own naiveté. "What am I saying, of course he would if they got in the way."

"Which Slytherin?" asked Caitlin. "Don't suppose it was Draco Malfoy, was it?"

"No. It was not."

"Shame." said both Luella and Caitlin together.

"So who was it then?" asked Luella, growing impatient.

Dumbledore looked her straight in the eye. "It was your friend, Marlie Lovegood."

"Marlie?" Luella whispered, going pale. "No. Oh no." She shook her head, not able to believe that one of her own friends had fallen victim to the Heir, and furious at herself for not having been able to stop it.

"Poor girl." said Caitlin softly. She looked up at Dumbledore. "Has Mel been told yet?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Severus went over there this afternoon. They took it rather well considering. Severus tells me that Leonard and Melissa only shouted at each other for half an hour, and he and Melissa were eventually able to talk Leonard out of withdrawing both children from Hogwarts."

"I'll go over there later." said Caitlin. "I expect Mel'll want someone to talk to. Such bad luck to have something like this happen twice. Still, at least Marlie's sure to make it this time."

"There is that." said Dumbledore. "But will there be anything left for her to wake up to?"

Luella looked up at this, something having occurred to her. "Sir... if there's been another attack... and I was nowhere near at the time... does that mean I can go back? I mean, there's no way I could have done this, so I'm in the clear, right?"

Caitlin and Dumbledore exchanged looks. "Technically, yes, but there's a lot more to it than that." Caitlin sighed.

"It's true." Dumbledore confirmed. "Even if it were an open and shut case, the red tape and bureaucracy would take at least a week, if not longer. And it's not an open and shut case. Lucius has already told the governors that you can control the monster without physically being there, it's not impossible for him to maintain that you did it from Surrey. I'm sure he'd do his best to block any attempt to reinstate you."

"So I'm stuck here then." said Luella despondently.

"Not necessarily." said Caitlin thoughtfully. "If we could find a way to get rid of Lucius Malfoy, get him off the board of governors, we might have a chance."

"However," said Dumbledore, "probably the best way is for us to prove it wasn't you once and for all. To establish your innocence in such a way that not even Lucius Malfoy can gainsay you."

"How's that?" asked Luella.

"By finding out who it really was. By unmasking the First Heir of Slytherin and whoever is helping them." Dumbledore's eyes bored into hers. "If we can find who really is behind all this, you will be proved innocent beyond all reasonable doubt. It's the only way, Luella."

"But how am I meant to do anything from here?" Luella demanded. "All the action's at the other end of the country!"

"If I know Rianne Stormosi and my daughter, you'll find a way round *that*, I am sure." said Caitlin firmly. She turned to Dumbledore. "I suppose you'd best be getting back to Hogwarts, Albus. They'll need you there more than ever now."

Dumbledore shook his head. "They won't. Or if they do, they'll have to manage without me. Lucius didn't waste any time, Caitlin. Young Draco contacted his mother over the Floo to talk to her about what happened, and had the bad luck to have Lucius overhear, Severus tells me. I can actually believe that, Draco was rather fond of his cousin."

"He's got a funny way of showing it." remarked Caitlin sourly. "So what's he done now?"

"Talked to the rest of the governors demanding, and securing, my immediate dismissal as Headmaster." sighed Dumbledore. "I'm out of a job, Caitlin."

"What?" shrieked Caitlin, leaping to her feet. "They can't do that! Right! That does it! I'm going round to see each one of these craven cowards, and getting them to change their minds. Whatever Lucius had to threaten to get them to sack you, I'll make it sound like a hot tub and massage!"

"Caitlin, wait!" Dumbledore jumped out of his seat and stopped her before she could storm out. "It won't do any good. Lucius is too powerful for that. Minerva and Severus are running the school at present, they should be able to handle the situation. If all else fails, I shall encourage Severus to apply. That way, at least we will have someone loyal to us in charge, while Lucius will believe someone sympathetic to him is running the school. But I'm hoping it won't come to that."

"I hope not!" Caitlin shuddered. "Poor Severus, I hope he's coping with it all." She turned back to Dumbledore. "So where are you going to go now? That little house of yours in Hogsmeade?"

"Maybe." sighed Dumbledore. "It's not going to be easy, but I'm sure I'll manage."

"You could stay here." Caitlin suggested. "For the time being. I've a spare room, and it's not like you've never done the same for me."

Dumbledore blinked. "Really? Caitlin, are you sure? I don't want to impose..."

Caitlin dismissed his concerns. "Don't worry, of course you can. You gave me somewhere to stay after my mum died and I had nowhere to go. And you stopped them taking Deanna into care too. I want to return the favour."

"You don't need to do that." said Dumbledore. But he couldn't help smiling. "But I'll take you up on it anyway. I'd be glad to stay here a while. Just until everything gets sorted out."

"Which it will." said Luella. They both turned to look at her, having almost forgotten she was there. She was still sitting on the arm of a chair, clutching at the fabric beneath and looking more determined than they'd ever seen her before. "I'll find out who's causing all this and get them back, if I have to die doing it. The Malfoys will regret ever tangling with me."

Not, of course, that she had any immediate ideas as to how she was going to go about this. However, that didn't stop her brooding on it all night. Back in her own bed in her own home, a million miles away from the world where the Heir of Slytherin stalked the corridors of Hogwarts, she lay awake, thoughts of vengeance circling round and round her head. *Heir of Slytherin, you have truly upped the stakes now!* An attack on her friend had done what all the talk of quests and destiny and ancient prophecies could not - made her want to take him on with all her heart and all her soul. Once it had been an abstract responsibility. Now... now things had just got personal. But how was she meant to take revenge when she was stranded hundreds of miles away?

The answer came sooner than she thought. At that very moment, she heard a scratching at her window. Switching on her bedside light, she turned to see what it was.

And leapt out of bed with joy at seeing the familiar silhouette of Clytemnestra the peregrine falcon perched there with an envelope in her talons, sitting expectantly, waiting to be let in.

"Nestra!" Luella whispered, fumbling for the key and unlocking the main window. "Alright, girl, don't worry, I'm letting you in right now. Hold on!" Pushing the window open, she held the net curtain open as the falcon flew in, dropping an envelope on her pillow before perching on the headboard, cawing almost tenderly at Luella.

"Missed me, did you?" Luella smiled, running a finger underneath the falcon's beak before turning her attention to the envelope. Crawling back into bed, she ripped it open. "So what's your mistress go to say for herself then?" She unfolded the letter within and started reading, noting with a raised eyebrow that it was in Rianne's handwriting.

Luella, we have a problem.

She couldn't help smiling at that. Much as Rianne liked to present herself as a sophisticated Welsh-Italian pure-blood, the formative years spent abroad always seemed to show through whenever her friend was under stress. Specifically, the formative years spent travelling around America in the back of a caravan the size of the Tylers' house. Rianne had, of course, managed to get rid of all trace of an American accent, having moved back to Wales at age seven, but just occasionally it showed through.

The battle's just been taken right to our front door. Don't know if word has got back to you guys in Little Ol' England just yet, but the Heir's gone and done it this time. The bastard got Marls. Granger too.

Luella lowered the letter. Somehow, reading it in cold ink, in the bitter tones of someone right there on the scene, made it seem so much more real. They got Marls. Damn them. She forced herself to read on.

Security's gone haywire round here - six o'clock curfew, all clubs and activities cancelled, no one allowed outside their common room unless escorted by a teacher, it's like Camp Colditz in here. And we're getting mighty tired of it. Anyways, we couldn't get Steve McQueen, so we're counting on you instead. We need you back here, Lu. Damn the rules. Damn bureaucracy. You've gotta get yourself up here, and sort this asshole out once and for all!

"Arsehole, it's arsehole, when will you get it right?" muttered Luella. "You're not trekking round deepest, darkest Oklahoma now!" (*Author's note: apologies to all residents of Oklahoma. I don't mean to imply that your state is in anyway uncivilised, it was just the first one that came to mind.*)

There's a Hogsmeade weekend coming up this Saturday, assuming they don't cancel that too. Can you get the Floo up to the Three Broomsticks and meet us there at 3pm? You'll need to use Glamory to make sure you're not noticed, but that's not going to stop me seeing you, luckily for us.

Lucky indeed, thought Luella, beginning to smile. This sounded like it might actually work. She'd never dreamed it could be so easy to get back to Hogwarts. Of course, it was only temporary, but it might be all she'd need.

We'll sneak you back into Hogwarts, hide you in our dorm, talk things over, and when everyone's asleep, we'll go and have a look for this Chamber of Secrets. Sound good to you?

Very good indeed, Luella thought. She had no idea what they'd do when she got there, but just seeing her friends again would be a start.

*If you're up for it, write and let us know. If there's any problems, we'll get back to you.
See you Saturday, kiddo!*

*Later,
Rianne*

Luella smiled as she reached for pen and paper and started to reply. Hadn't she just that minute been wondering how she was going to get up there and avenge Marlie? And now the answer had literally fallen into her lap. Attaching the reply to Nestra's foot, she watched the falcon depart, disappearing into the night.

"Heir of Slytherin, watch out!" she whispered. "The Redeemer's coming back!"

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Back at Hogwarts, the announcement of Dumbledore's departure had caused not a few students to start worrying. Even if the curfew hadn't been in operation, no one would have dared go wandering around the school anyway, not with Dumbledore gone. However, another related event had also caused quite a stir.

"Hagrid's gone to Azkaban?" Deanna asked, puzzled. Hagrid was an even less likely candidate for being the Heir of Slytherin than Luella had been. "Why?"

"It was him last time, that's why." Lucas Vetinari told her. "Apparently that's why he's not a full wizard - they expelled him back then after he got caught harbouring monsters. That's what my father says anyway."

Deanna turned to Rianne. "Hagrid harbouring monsters, why is that not a surprise?" She turned back to Lucas. "But he wouldn't deliberately set a monster on a student, would he? Or keep something that was attacking people."

"That's what I thought." Lucas replied. "But apparently Father reckons that people have been complaining, so the Ministry have packed him off to Azkaban as a precaution. Fudge himself ordered it, which is a bit of a surprise. Apparently, Melissa Lovegood was dead set against it and he had to overrule her."

"Because it's obviously not him." Deanna pointed out. "And Auntie Mel surely knows that."

Rianne, who had up til now been looking very thoughtful, finally decided to speak.

"So if the Ministry thinks it's him, and have packed him off to Azkaban, why haven't they pardoned Lu? She wasn't even here when Marlie and Hermione were attacked. So if Hagrid's now to blame, isn't that tantamount to admitting it wasn't her?"

Lucas just shrugged. "Couldn't tell you, Ri. Probably her case has been buried under a tangle of bureaucracy and been completely lost to sight. Besides, since when has the Ministry ever admitted it's wrong?"

All three of them had to agree that it had never yet happened. And then their conversation was interrupted by the voice of Draco Malfoy.

"That and the fact that certain less than friendly elements don't want her back here. And when those elements don't want something, it doesn't happen. Surely you're not so naive as all that?"

"Those elements being your father, perchance?" snarled Deanna.

Draco shrugged. "I can neither confirm nor deny that particular rumour."

"That's a yes then." said Rianne. Draco chose to ignore her.

"Malfoy, did you have a reason for being here?" Lucas asked impatiently.

"Just thought I'd give you some friendly advice." Draco suddenly dropped the languid exterior. "Listen, I want this stopped as much as you do. If they can attack a Slytherin, even a half-blood, they can attack anyone. And I liked Marls. So, listen up. Luella won't be coming back any time soon. So if you want her here, you'll have to break some rules in order to do it. Sneak her in, do what you have to. Once she's here, she can stop this. I don't know who's behind it, I've been told virtually nothing. But this I do know - Luella Martin's more than capable of bringing this to a close which is why she was expelled. So is Dumbledore, and that's why he's been disposed of."

"Your father had a hand in that too, did he?" snapped Rianne.

Draco's face darkened for an instant, before the earnest look returned. "Doesn't matter. Point is, Dumbledore was the last person in this school who could keep the Heir at bay. With him gone, there's no one left to stop the Heir. If you don't do something, there will be another attack, and next time it might be fatal. Next time it could be you. Think about it, Tyler." He gazed earnestly into their eyes for a few moments before turning and leaving.

Lucas watched him go. "Is it me, or has Draco Malfoy finally flipped?"

"Nah, he was always nuts." said Deanna. "But he does have a point. We do need Lu here."

"Ah." said Lucas. "Is this going to involve you two doing something incredibly stupid and illegal?"

"As if we'd do anything stupid." Rianne smiled.

"I notice you didn't deny the illegal part." Lucas observed. "In that case, I'd better leave you both to get on with it. If you get caught, I want no part of it. See you both." With that, he took his leave.

"Ri, I hope this plan of yours works." said Deanna quietly. "Malfoy's right, with Dumbledore gone, there's no one left to stop the Heir. There could be a death. There's more than just avenging Marls at stake here, the whole school's in danger. You know as well as I do that getting rid of Hagrid was just the Ministry trying to look like it was doing something about it."

"It'll work." said Rianne with her usual humility. "How can it not? It's simple. We get Lu back, she uses her psychic connection to the Heir to find out who it is, we find them, turn them in, mystery solved, school saved, we're heroes, Lu gets forgiven, everybody celebrates. It's foolproof. You'll see."

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Not all the Slytherins were as calm as Rianne, however. In particular, Ginny had taken recent developments very badly indeed. She'd spent most of the last few days lying face down on her bed crying, or walking around looking pale and trembling. She hadn't been eating much lately and both Lydia and Autumn knew she hadn't been sleeping well.

"Ginny, are you sure you're OK?" Autumn asked her, perched on Ginny's bed as the young Weasley lay curled up alongside her.

"Course not." whispered Ginny, tears pouring down her cheeks. "Marlie's gone! The Heir got her. Marlie's gone and it's all my fault!" She went off into another bout of sobbing.

"It's not your fault!" Autumn told her, taking the crying girl into her arms. "Just because she'd been looking for you at the time, doesn't mean you should blame yourself. She knew the Heir was still at large, she knew the danger. Gin, it wasn't anything to do with you, it wasn't your fault!"

Ginny just shook her head. "Oh, if you only knew..." she whispered.

"Knew what?" Autumn asked.

"Doesn't matter." Ginny said, just a bit too quickly. She stopped talking as the door opened and Lydia entered.

"Hey, Gin." she said gently. "Feeling better?"

"A little." said Ginny, forcing a smile and trying to dry her eyes.

Lydia nodded. "Well, that's some good news at any rate. Autumn, can I have a word with you quickly? I need a hand with my Herbology essay."

Autumn was not slow to pick up on the look in Lydia's eyes that clearly said Herbology was the last thing on her mind. Telling Ginny not to let it get to her, she followed her friend out.

Sure enough, the first thing Lydia did was drag her friend into the bathroom across the corridor, locking the door behind them.

"So, what's up, Lyd?" Autumn asked. "You've got that same look Rianne Stormosi gets when she's on to something."

"And with good cause." Lydia indicated the direction of their dorm with a flick of the head. "Ginny still blaming herself?"

Autumn nodded. "Yeah. I keep telling her it wasn't her fault, but she won't listen. Keeps saying if only I knew, I'd change my mind."

"Exactly." Lydia smiled thinly. "Autumn, I can't stop thinking about what Marlie said to us before she got attacked. The way she was asking questions about that diary, and that look in her eyes! She looked horrified when I mentioned that diary. Like I'd said Ginny was under a Death Spell or something. Then she told us to stay with other people and ran off. Almost as if she knew there was going to be an attack."

Autumn shook her head. "But how could she have done? None of us know who's behind it!"

"No?" laughed Lydia. She indicated towards the dorm again. "I think some of us know more than they're telling. I think Ginny's got an idea of who it is."

"You're not telling me Ginny Weasley's behind it, are you?" Autumn demanded.
"Lydia, she's our friend. She's a nice girl, she wouldn't do anything like that! Besides, she likes Marlie! She's devastated by all this."

"Devastated... and perhaps just a little guilty?" Lydia suggested. "Autumn, I don't think it's her, but I do think she knows who it is. And I think that diary's linked to it all too."

Something occurred to Autumn. "The diary. Didn't you say she was holding it right after talking to Malfoy? You know, when she was acting weird and possessed? You don't think he's involved, do you? That maybe he's got a hold over her and the diary's evidence?"

"He wouldn't have given it back to her if it was evidence." said Lydia. "Either against him or her. If it's against her, he'd want to keep it for blackmail, and if it was against him, he wouldn't be letting it out of his sight. But I think you may be on the right lines, Autumn."

"So what do we do?" asked Autumn, shooting a fearful glance over her shoulder. "We can hardly go and ask Ginny straight out 'Are you helping Malfoy attack students?', can we?"

"No." said Lydia thoughtfully. "But we do need to do something. We'll have to have a word with Deanna and Rianne, get them to investigate. Marlie obviously knew something about that diary, chances are they do too. If we tell them what we know, they might be able to figure out just what's going on."

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So it was that the following day found the two first years approaching Deanna and Rianne at lunch. Despite it being exactly a week since the last attack, the atmosphere was alive with anticipation. After much discussion, it had been agreed that the Hogsmeade weekend would still be going ahead. Most of the students were not sorry to have an opportunity to get out of the school.

Nor were Deanna and Rianne, but for very different reasons. While they were both looking forward to seeing Luella again, they were both also beginning to wonder what exactly this was going to achieve.

"Rianne, have you actually thought this through?" Deanna whispered. "What are we going to do when she gets here? We've got no idea who to approach, where the Chamber is, or anything!"

"Yeah, but she might." Rianne whispered back. "She's Second Heir, she's got all sorts of weird psychic abilities, just her being here'll throw down a challenge to You-Know-Who. He'll have to reveal himself somehow. And when he does..."

"I hope you're right." sighed Deanna, by no means as confident. She looked up to see Lydia and Autumn standing there. "Do you two want something?"

"Er..." Lydia began uncertainly, turning to Autumn for support. Her friend gave her a nudge, motioning for her to get on with it. Lydia turned back, gathering her courage. "It's about Ginny."

"What about her?" asked Deanna, indicating for the two girls to sit alongside her. She gave Lydia a questioning look. "Is she OK?"

"Not as such." sighed Autumn. "She's taken this attack very badly."

"To be expected." murmured Rianne. She fixed Autumn very closely, gazing at her, guessing that there was more to this than met the eye. "And?"

"And..." Autumn took a deep breath. "Do you two know anything about a diary?"

That got their attention. Both fourth years swung round to face her, sitting bolt upright.

"A diary?" Deanna asked, with that same horrified look that Marlie had had when Lydia had told her. "What diary? Whose diary?"

"Ginny's." said Lydia. "She's got a diary, a small black book, has had since the year began. And, well, we think it's got something to do with the attacks."

Rianne put her spoon down, stunned. "Ginny's got a diary?" she whispered, exchanging looks with Deanna. "Write in it a lot, does she?"

"She used to, all the time." said Autumn. "Never let us see it though."

"I bet." said Deanna softly. "Go on."

"There's more." said Lydia. "Last Saturday, before the attack, Ginny wasn't herself. She was acting really strangely, really aggressive and touchy, and with this really deep voice. And her eyes looked odd. And she was clutching this diary. Wouldn't put it down. She stayed in the dorm all morning, telling us she wasn't well and virtually biting our heads off when we tried to talk to her. So we left her to it, and ran into Marlie at breakfast. We told her what had happened and she looked really concerned."

"Then we mentioned the diary." Autumn finished. "And as soon as she heard *that*, she took off immediately, saying she had to find Ginny. She warned us to stay with other people, not to go off on our own, like she knew there was going to be another attack. And she was right. Except I don't think she thought it'd be her."

"She never does." sighed Rianne. "Typical bloody Marlie. No sense of danger whatsoever. You were saying."

"Not much left to tell." Lydia shrugged. "Ginny was devastated afterwards. She's spent the entire week crying, blaming herself, saying it's all her fault. I know it's a natural reaction to be upset, but she's going over the top. Keeps hinting that if we

knew what she did, we'd blame her too. I don't think she did it, but she knows something. I'm sure she does."

"Poor Ginny." Deanna whispered, staring in horror. "Poor, poor girl. What she must have been going through, gods only know..." She leaned forward urgently. "Listen, Lydia, this is important. You two need to go and find Ginny right away, and *stay with her*. Don't let her out of your sight. This is really important. Also, get that diary off her if you can, preferably without her knowing. If she goes all weird and possessed, then you need to put the Body Bind Charm on her, stop her going anywhere. Then get the diary by any means necessary and keep it away from her, until we get back."

Lydia and Autumn nodded. "What about you, what are you going to do?" Lydia asked.

"We're going to Hogsmeade." Rianne answered. "We've got an appointment with someone who can help put an end to all this. And not a minute too soon, it would appear. We'll see if we can cut things short though, come back early. I'm hoping nothing will happen, but I don't want to leave you guys on your own for too long if we can help it."

At that moment, the bell rang, and various teachers and prefects began calling out for all those going to Hogsmeade to join them. Deanna and Rianne got to their feet.

"Right, we'll see you both in a couple of hours." said Deanna. "Remember, don't let her out of your sight, and if she shows signs of acting unlike her normal self, immobilise her. Understand?"

The two first years nodded. Although it hadn't been spelt out exactly why they had to do all this, both girls guessed that it wasn't wise to argue. Deanna and Rianne said their goodbyes before leaving to join the rest of the departing students.

"How serious do you think all this is, Lydia?" Autumn asked as they watched the older girls leave.

"Very, you saw the look on Tyler's face." said Lydia, biting her lip. "Come on, let's go and find Ginny. I only hope it's not too late for her."

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Meanwhile, Luella was making her way across the road to the Tyler house, fully equipped for the challenge of a lifetime. White sleeveless top that left her Mark fully visible, jeans and a pair of strong boots formed her outfit, topped with her newly unearthed Hogwarts cloak and Medea Tyler's wand tucked into her belt. It wasn't much, but it would have to do. She only hoped it would be enough.

Her parents had gone out shopping for the afternoon, off to some boring gardening centre that would probably take them all day. While she'd seen Caitlin with her own eyes mount that new motorbike of hers and head off Londonwards on it that very morning, presumably going to work, although taking a joyride wasn't out of the question. Of Dumbledore there had obviously been no sign - but Luella was confident that her Glamoury would be sufficient to conceal her.

In the time-honoured tradition, she placed her left hand on the gate sign and recited her maternal lineage.

"I, Luella Angelica Martin, Second Heir of Morgan Tal-y-Rhys Slytherin, Redeemer of Slytherin, daughter of Celia Carroll, daughter of Kathleen Marshall, seek entrance to the home of the Lady Caitlin." Why these things always had to sound so pompous, Luella would never know. She would have preferred a simple 'Slytherin Redeemer. Let me in.' Still, that was tradition for you. It seemed to work though. The security charms faded out before her very eyes, and the wrought iron gates swung open to let her in.

The front door also opened as she approached it. Caitlin had primed things back in March so that she was admitted automatically. Evidently she trusted her. Luella felt a slight twinge of guilt at breaking in and hijacking Caitlin's Floo grate like this but there wasn't any alternative. It was the nearest one, and the only one she could make use of without getting spotted and thrown out.

Casting a Glamour over herself, she slipped into the hallway, not wanting to be spotted by her erstwhile Headmaster. He might not be her teacher any more, but he was still a powerful wizard and she didn't want to have to explain her mission to him. He might try and talk her out of it, or worse, alert someone at Hogwarts.

Fortunately, it seemed her luck was in. There didn't seem to be anyone around. Moving on into the living room, she took a look around. Empty. Breathing a sigh of relief, she dropped the Glamour and went over to the fire, lighting it with a word and reaching for the dish of Floo powder that was kept ready on the mantelpiece.

"Good afternoon, Luella." came Dumbledore's amiable tones from behind her. Nearly knocking the Floo bowl over in fright, she spun round, to find Albus Dumbledore watching her from an armchair which she could have sworn had been empty not a second before.

"How did you do that?" she demanded.

He tapped the side of his nose. "Magic, my dear, magic. And magic which you have yet to grasp and maybe never will, although one of your friends is making a surprising amount of progress towards it. But that's not important right now. Were you thinking of going somewhere?"

"Er..." Luella began racking her brains for an excuse that would justify her bizarre combination of magical and Muggle clothing, with a Mark concealable only by Glamour fully on show and her wand at the ready. She couldn't think of one. "Maybe." she said warily.

"Don't let me stop you." Dumbledore leaned back into the chair, putting his feet up on the footstool and folding his arms behind his head. "Although I do think it's a little discourteous to come here while Caitlin's back is turned and use her Floo connection without her knowing. Does she know you're planning to borrow it?"

"Er... no." Luella admitted.

"I see." Dumbledore regarded her closely. "Where are you off to anyway? Would it be a certain all-magical village in the Scottish Highlands by any chance?"

"It might be." Luella confessed, unable to directly lie to a teacher. Even a dismissed one.

"I thought it might be." Dumbledore unfolded his arms and sat upright. "Hogsmeade weekend this weekend, isn't it?"

Luella nodded, her heart sinking at having been unmasked so easily. Looked like all their carefully laid plans were in ruins. "I was going to meet up with Deanna and Rianne. They were going to sneak me into school and we were going after the Heir." She stared at the floor, defeated. Great, now not only was she in trouble, but her friends faced a detention on top of everything else they had to worry about. Wonderful.

Which was why his next remark caused her to almost jump out of her skin in surprise.

"An excellent idea, if I may say so."

Luella looked up, unable to believe her ears. "What?"

"I said, I think it's a good idea." Dumbledore repeated. "It's about time someone put a stop to things. And I think you have a better chance than most at doing just that."

"You do?" Luella asked, not able to believe her luck. Albus Dumbledore was giving her the green light to go after Voldemort?

"Oh yes." Dumbledore nodded. "You have that Mark for a start. Not to mention two very unusual magical talents. And something even more important." He indicated the wand in her belt. "That wand was the one that helped finish Lord Voldemort back in 1981. It was never able to finish its job - Voldemort killed its previous owner before she could finish casting her spell." A dark look flitted across his face as he said this, but it was soon gone. "Something of that unfinished magic still lingers in its core. Maybe you yourself have felt it. Tell me, haven't you ever looked at it and wondered if there's something in it resembling a soul?"

Luella had to admit she had.

"You see, it is no ordinary wand. It's a Slytherin wand, a wand with unfinished business." Here Dumbledore smiled. "What a House you are. Even your wands have vendettas."

"It's got lion sinews in it too." Luella grinned. "Typical Slytherins, eh? No opportunity missed to get one over the Old Enemy."

A hint of sadness appeared in Dumbledore's eyes. "Ah, Luella." he sighed. "Gryffindor House has never been your enemy. The greatest threats to Slytherin House have always emerged from within its own ranks, and most are traceable to the

endless feuding between its two most notable families. I pray your generation will come to its senses and end it."

"Well, we'll have to see, won't we?" said Luella. She checked her watch. "I'd better be going, I'm meeting Rianne at three."

"Yes, you'd better not waste any time." Dumbledore still sounded serious. "I think you will be needed there sooner than you think."

Luella didn't like the sound of this. "What do you mean, sooner than I think?" she asked. "Has something happened?"

"I don't know." said Dumbledore. "But I feel... uneasy. I think Voldemort may be about to make his next move, if he hasn't already. You will only just be in time, if in fact you are."

"That's not good news." said Luella, feeling her anxiety begin to mount. "Haven't you got anything encouraging to say?"

"Yes, just a few things. First, remember that you are not alone. You have far more allies than you realise, and I do not believe you will be alone when the final confrontation comes. Others too have a stake in this, and they will come to aid you. Second, I have not been idle this past year. I may not have been able to halt Lord Voldemort, but I have been able to keep him at bay, and I've been leaving magic of my own at Hogwarts. So long as there are those at Hogwarts truly loyal to me, then they shall always have assistance when they are most in need of it."

"And?" Luella asked, sensing that the old man was not yet finished.

"And finally, here is advice of a more practical nature." said Dumbledore, the familiar twinkle in his eye. "Were you thinking of going direct to the Three Broomsticks?"

"That's right." said Luella.

"Don't." he warned her. "You'll never get a Glamour in place before someone sees you, and even if you do, the sound of the Floo activating and no one arriving will set alarm bells ringing in even the least astute mind. You really need somewhere a little more private to arrive at."

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that." Luella felt her hope fading away. "Do you know of anywhere?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Dumbledore replied. "I happen to own a little house in Hogsmeade, just off the main market square. Nice little place, empty now of course. I hardly ever visit, and the last time it was used was after the end of the last war, when I let Caitlin stay there after the last battle left her homeless. However, the Floo grate still works, and if you're arriving, you don't need a lit fire either. Here, have the key." He produced a medium sized iron key on a chain and tossed it over to her.

"Thanks!" gasped Luella.

"No problem. The address you need is Tumbleweed Cottage, Hogsmeade. I'll let Caitlin know where you've gone, put her mind at ease."

Luella privately thought that telling Caitlin Tyler she'd gone off to Hogwarts for a showdown with Voldemort was likely to do the opposite but said nothing. Instead, she thanked him again and prepared to leave.

"Thanks, Professor! I really appreciate all this."

Dumbledore waved her away. "Not a problem, my dear, not a problem. If you succeed, we all benefit. If you don't, we will all suffer. Now, on your way, and the best of luck!"

"Thanks! I'll do my best." Luella promised. Turning away and reaching for the Floo powder, she took a deep breath and prepared herself. Then, with the words "Tumbleweed Cottage, Hogsmeade!", she stepped into the fire.

By this time, Deanna and Rianne were firmly ensconced at a corner table in the Three Broomsticks. For some reason, there always seemed to be either a vacant table or someone about to leave whenever Deanna Tyler or Rianne Stormosi ever wanted a seat in the pub. It was one of those phenomena that no one had ever yet managed to explain. Right up there with another strange phenomenon, that when either of them wanted to be left alone, they generally were.

Today was no exception. A small group of third year Hufflepuffs had looked up, seen them walk in and immediately decided now was a good time to raid Honeydukes, leaving the table clean and ready for them. The two Slytherins took their seats without a word.

"Is she here yet?" Deanna asked. With Luella going to be covered in Glamoury, she had no way of knowing when her friend was actually going to arrive.

"No." said Rianne softly. "No sign of her anywhere. Although we are early."

"Aurors are always early, it's a standard security procedure." said Deanna. "And if my mother's been giving Luella any kind of tuition at all, she'll have told her that. What's up Ri, you look worried."

"I am worried." Rianne replied, biting her lip. "I'm beginning to wonder if you should have stayed at Hogwarts with Ginny."

"What, and leave you here all on your own? No chance!" smiled Deanna. "Besides, I want to see Lu again."

"Yes, but that means Lydia and Autumn are on their own with a Ginny who could be prone to possession by the diary at any moment." Rianne persisted. "I feel bad about leaving them to deal with that. Maybe you should have stayed, just in case things got

nasty. I could have kept watch for Lu here. It wouldn't have looked too suspicious, I could easily have persuaded Lucas to stay with me."

"I knew there was an ulterior motive." Deanna remarked with a grin. "You'll do anything for a bit of private time with Signor Vetinari, won't you?"

"Deanna, be serious!" Rianne snapped. "I'm telling you, I have a very bad feeling about all this. I still think you should have stayed."

"Well, too late now." Deanna shrugged. "I'm here. If there's any problems, Lu'll have to go and kick some arse, that's all."

"That's right, land me with all the work, why don't you?" A familiar voice came from in front of them, as a shadow cut off the light. Turning, they saw none other than Luella herself, standing there with her cloak billowing, hair falling loose around her face and a grin from ear to ear. "Hey, girls. Miss me?"

"Lu!" gasped Deanna, leaping to her feet and hugging her friend. "You made it!"

Luella returned the embrace, smiling tenderly. "Yes. I made it." She gave Deanna a squeeze, momentarily burying her face in her friend's hair, before releasing her and turning to Rianne, who was standing up to greet her. The two girls clasped hands.

"Hey Lu. Good to see you again."

"Hey, Rianne. Likewise, mate, likewise." Luella took a seat as they all sat down again. "So, people. The Heir got Marls, did he?"

"He did." Deanna confirmed. "Bastard."

Luella nodded. "And Malfoy's neutralised Dumbledore too."

Rianne nodded. "Yep. He doesn't waste any time, does he?"

"No, he doesn't." Luella stopped smiling. "Which is why we have to hurry. Dumbledore's currently staying at your house, Deanna."

"He is?" Deanna blinked. "Why?"

"Apparently he did the same for your mum once and she's returning the favour. But that's not important. What is important is that he spoke to me before I left. No, don't worry." Luella raised her hands, quieting their protests. "He's not going to intervene unless we need him. But he did tell me not to hang around. Reckons Voldie's about to make his next move, if he hasn't already, and that I'll only just be in time."

Rianne gave Deanna a nudge. "See? Told you you should have stayed!"

"Stayed?" Luella asked. "Stayed where?"

"With Ginny." Deanna explained.

"Why?" Luella asked, beginning to look very concerned.

"It's her." sighed Rianne. "She's been causing the attacks. Someone slipped You-Know-Who's diary to her at the start of the year, and she must have written in it not knowing what it was. And it's taking her over, making her attack people."

Luella stared in disbelief. "Ginny?" She shook her head. "Poor thing. And yet..." She began to look rather thoughtful. "Ginny, yes, it makes sense now. She borrowed my power back in January, I thought she was fending off an attack. She must have been trying to stop the diary taking her over, and when she called on me, it worked. She must have got rid of it in the toilets. Then Harry found it, it made its way back to us... and Ginny obviously recognised it when Deanna took it and stole it back off us." She looked at Deanna. "If she wasn't in so much danger, I'd have to slap her." She got to her feet. "We have to find her. If Dumbledore is right, and you're getting Sight warnings too, he could be making a move again even now."

Rianne and Deanna got to their feet to follow her, but they never got the chance to leave. At that moment, Laetitia Vetinari and Percy Weasley walked in.

"All Hogwarts students to stop what they're doing and come with us!" Percy announced. "Everyone to come back to school immediately."

"What, now?" asked Deanna.

"Yes, now." snapped Percy irritably. "That's what immediately means, isn't it?"

Rianne ignored Percy and approached Laetitia. "Tish, what's going on? We're not meant to be going back for another hour and a half yet."

"We're not sure ourselves, to tell you the truth." Laetitia sighed. "All we know is that McGonagall just sent an owl out calling for all students to return at once. I'm very much afraid though that something may have happened." The look on her face left them in no doubt what she meant by that. "Listen, everyone's assembling outside. You two go and join them, last thing we want is for something to happen to you as well." She turned away and began shepherding various children outside, some more willing than others.

Deanna turned to Luella and Rianne. "Well, folks, looks like you were right. He's made his next move. I only hope we're in time." However, she did not look optimistic.

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Deanna's fears were proved to be right. A quick survey of the Slytherin common room proved that Ginny was nowhere in sight. As soon as Rianne and Deanna entered, they were met by Lydia and Autumn, both near tears.

"We couldn't find her!" Autumn sobbed. "We went straight back to the dorm, but she wasn't anywhere round here. We got Mike Lovegood to check the library too and Draco volunteered to search the boys dorms but she wasn't there either."

Lydia had her arm round her distraught friend. She was more composed, but still looked terrified. "We couldn't find the diary either," she whispered. "I went through Ginny's things but there's no sign of it anywhere. Wherever she is, she's got it with her."

"We're sorry!" Autumn wept. "We're really sorry!"

"It's alright." Deanna tried to reassure her. "It wasn't your fault. You tried your best. If anything, it's mine, I should have stayed with you. Don't blame yourselves."

Autumn nodded, still sniffing but not as upset as she was. Lydia was still watching them both, intrigued.

"Did you find whoever you were supposed to see in Hogsmeade?" she asked.

Rianne and Deanna exchanged looks and smiled, Rianne glancing over Deanna's shoulder to where Luella, safely hidden by her Glamoury, was standing.

"Yes, we found her." Rianne turned back to the first years. "Listen, we're going to do our level best to save Ginny, alright? We've got what we needed, we're ready to go. I won't pretend we're out of the woods yet, but we're going to try. OK?"

Lydia nodded, managing a smile. "Gotcha. Thanks, Rianne." She led Autumn away.

At that moment, the door opened, and the excited buzzing that had swept the common room stopped as Professor Snape walked in.

Rianne was first to approach. "Sir, what's happening? Has there been another attack?"

"No. Worse." Snape settled himself into one of the high-backed antique chairs that pre-dated the Lovegood Decor Revolution. "You had all best sit down, this is not good news."

The assembled Slytherins did as he asked, every one of them apprehensive. None of them, save Luella, had ever seen their House Master look so defeated as he did now.

"I said there wasn't another attack." he began. "Strictly speaking that's not true - the Heir of Slytherin *has* struck again. But the victim was not Petrified this time."

"Oh my god, there's been a death." Blaise Zabini breathed. She wasn't the only one looking shocked. All the Slytherins, even Malfoy, looked as if they'd been slapped.

Snape didn't deny it. "It would appear so, yes." he said softly. "Prepare yourselves, children, it gets worse. The victim's body has yet to be found - she's been taken by the monster into the very Chamber itself."

There was a collective gasp from the gathered Slytherins. Pansy Parkinson gave a little shriek and hid her face.

"How do you know?" whispered Draco, sitting beside her, arms draped protectively around his friend.

"There was a message underneath the first." said Snape very deliberately. "It read *Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever*. The girl in question's not been seen since lunchtime."

"Who?" Mike Lovegood asked. "Who is it?"

Snape lowered his eyes. "It is my grave misfortune to have to tell you that the girl was one of us."

"No!" cried Autumn, bursting into tears as she realised who the victim must be. Sinking into Lydia's arms, she began to weep helplessly. "Ginny, Ginny, no!" Lydia didn't say a word, but a single tear began to make its way down her face.

"I'm sorry, Miss Montague." Snape said, his voice rather gentler than usual. "It was indeed your friend Miss Weasley."

The room was silent, apart from the sound of Autumn's sobbing. Virtually every Slytherin in the room had been stunned into silence. Bad enough to have one of their number Petrified. Far worse to have one missing, presumed almost certainly dead. Even Draco was observed hanging his head in sorrow, drawing Pansy into a hug.

Snape got to his feet. "Professor McGonagall has instructed me to inform you that she is closing the school as of now. The Hogwarts Express will be arriving first thing tomorrow after breakfast to take you all home. Your families will be informed.

Arrangements are being made with schools elsewhere, notably New Hogwarts in Maine USA, the Salem Witches Institute in Massachusetts, Emerald City Academy in Kansas, Beauxbatons in the South of France, Durmstrang in the far north, and various other schools, to take as many of you as possible, although should your parents wish to make other arrangements, they may do so." He paused. "I should like to offer my condolences to all of you. I know Miss Weasley was popular with a great many of you. I too will miss her." With that, he turned and left.

As soon as he was gone, the room burst into talk and chatter.

"Closing the school? They can't do that, surely!" Summer Montague was heard saying.

"They can, kid, and it looks like they just did." came Mike's reply. "Look, don't worry, it'll be OK, they'll find places for us all."

"Draco, you have to find me a place at Durmstrang!" Pansy's shrill voice cut through the air. "I am NOT going to the Salem Witches Institute! It's so horribly worthy and they have these stupid sororities where you have to toady up to the leaders in order to get in, and all the sorority girls look down on everyone else, and they're all just so bloody girly!"

"Chill, Pan, I'll find you a place at Durmstrang." snapped Draco. "Now in the meantime, can you just shut up about school? I've got more pressing concerns right now!"

Lydia turned to Deanna, tears in her eyes. "Can you... will you... is there anything you can do?"

Deanna squeezed the first year's shoulder. "I don't guarantee anything, Lydia. Ginny could already be dead by now. But I promise to try." She turned to Rianne, who was looking more than a little puzzled. "Come on. Let's talk."

Rianne nodded and, with a nod to Luella to join them, followed her out.

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Luella flung down the Glamour as she entered the dorm.

"Damn it, Dumbledore was right." she sighed, flinging herself on to her long-empty bed. "Voldie was planning his next move. And I was too late to stop him."

"Not your fault." Deanna sighed, joining her. "It's mine. When I heard Ginny had that diary, last thing I should have done was head off to Hogsmeade. Should have stayed with Lydia and Autumn, maybe I could have stopped this."

"Or maybe not." Rianne countered, pulling up a chair. "You heard them, by the time they reached the dorm, Ginny had already gone. But here's what I find bizarre. We've already established that Ginny is the one causing the attacks. So why has the Heir abducted her? Surely he needs her to carry on working for him? Why kill her if she's still useful?"

"Why indeed." murmured Luella. She looked at her Mark. "I'm wondering if this wasn't an attack, but more... a challenge. The Heir must know that abducting Ginny leaves us with no choice but to go after her. A Petrification requires no action from us - all we have to do is wait for them to be revived. But an actual abduction..." She looked both of her friends in the eye. "As of yet, there's no body been found. Knowing what we know, there's a very good chance that Ginny's still alive. And if she's still alive, then we have to do something. We have to find the Chamber, get inside, rescue Ginny, grab that diary and get back out again. Then go to Snape with the evidence. He must surely know who Riddle is, and he'll know it wasn't Ginny's fault. With all the evidence, we can get my expulsion overturned then have that diary destroyed. Are you two with me?"

"Absolutely, Lu. Just one tiny flaw. We don't actually know where the Chamber is." Rianne pointed out.

Luella just shrugged. "We'll find it. I'm the Second Heir, the knowledge must be inside me somewhere. I'm positive I was being called to it when it first opened. If we go to where the first attack happened, maybe we can figure things out from there."

"Sounds good to me." Rianne said. "There's just one other thing you ought to know. The monster's a Basilisk."

"You're not serious." Luella took in the looks on her friends' faces. "You are serious aren't you. Jesus Christ."

"No good asking him for help." Deanna told her. "One of the Middle East's most gifted mages ever he might have been, but that doesn't change the fact that he's indisputably, without a doubt, dead. Despite what the Muggles may think."

"Pity, casting out demons was a speciality of his." sighed Luella. "Never mind. A Basilisk, eh? Well, I'm a Parselmouth, aren't I? Maybe I can bargain with it. Offer it freedom in a remote part of South America in return for not killing us."

Rianne and Deanna couldn't help laughing.

"Sounds like a plan to me!" laughed Deanna. "Ri, any comments?"

Rianne shook her head. "None. Let's do it!"

"Alright then." Luella got to her feet. "Let's go to work."

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Chapter Twenty Seven The Chamber of Secrets

The Slytherin Common Room was still eerily silent as they entered it. Even given that the music wasn't playing for once, the common room was never normally this quiet.

Despite that, no one really reacted as the three girls, two visible, one cloaked in Glamoury, passed by. The only one to move was Draco.

"Where are you going?" he asked, frowning. "Not going to stick around and share the vigil?"

Deanna opened her mouth, about to snap back an angry retort, but Rianne stopped her with a touch of her hand.

"We're going on a rescue mission." she told him. "We're off to find the Chamber, kill the Heir, retrieve Ginny if she's still alive, and if she's not, bring her back for burial. Got a problem?"

Draco, who had half risen out of his seat, sat back down again. "No, not really. You do realise you'll both be killed in the process, don't you?"

Rianne just shrugged. "Better than sitting around doing nothing. I'm not going to wait for him to come for us too."

"Good luck with it then." said Draco. "Don't say I didn't warn you." Putting his feet up, he resumed his previous occupation of staring into the fire.

"Didn't offer to come along too, did he?" muttered Deanna as they left.

"Yeah, but Tyler, would you really want him along anyway?" Rianne whispered back.

"Well, no." Deanna admitted.

"Good thing he is such a craven coward." Luella added. "I don't want him knowing anything about this until we're done. Let him think we're off on a fool's errand. No need for him to know I'm back."

There was no argument at this. There was an unspoken feeling that this confrontation was their business and theirs alone. This was personal.

They proceeded in silence, Luella extending the glamour around all of them as they slipped past Snape's office. Probably not a good idea for him to know what they were up to. He might try and talk them out of it, although Luella felt herself pining for a word of comfort from him, a piece of advice, his reassuring presence alongside her. Caitlin too, ideally. Now that she was actually on her way for the final showdown, it hit her that she was really having to do this, really going into a fight to the death with Voldemort or one of his agents. Yes, she'd fought him last year, but last year she'd had Snape, Dumbledore and Caitlin around too. Now she was on her own, with only her friends and her own resources to protect her. She just hoped it would be enough.

At length, they arrived at the first floor corridor where Luella had first seen the fateful message that had started all this. Sure enough, there underneath it were the chilling words "*Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.*" Luella shivered at the mere sight of it. Stop it, she told herself. If what you know is true, Ginny could well be alive still. Well, that was true enough. But she also couldn't shake the feeling that she was walking into a trap.

"So now what?" asked Rianne "We're here. This is where it all started. Where do we go now? Any ideas, Lu?"

Luella traced the outline of her Mark. It didn't react. "No." she sighed. "I'm none the wiser." She tried to ignore the little voice inside her that jumped for joy at the prospect of not having to go into mortal danger after all. "Your Sight telling you anything?"

Rianne shook her head. "What, when I actually need it to? As if. Ask me who's going to win the 10.30 at Aintree tomorrow and I can give you the top three and odds at the start. Ask me where the Chamber is and my Inner Eye seems to have developed cataracts."

Deanna reached inside her cloak and began fumbling in her pocket. "Wait up, Lu, there's something I need to give you. I think it might come in useful." She dug around some more before withdrawing her hand, shimmering as the torchlight caught the golden links draped around it, and the small, winged ball dangling from it.

"Marlie's necklace!" Luella breathed. "Where'd you get that?"

"Off Marlie, duh." smiled Deanna. "Took it off her after she got Petrified. Didn't want it left lying around." She passed it to Luella. "It was in the Chamber of Secrets fighting Voldie, a Basilisk, and Marlie's shadow side that Marlie finally got out of her Sleeping Death trance and earned this little beauty. Marlie reckons that the spirit of her shadow, now allied to her, lives on in this thing, looks after her. I think you should wear it now - it might protect you."

"Like it protected Marlie so well against that Basilisk attack." Rianne muttered.

"Oh, I don't know." said Luella thoughtfully, gazing into the Snitch. "She did survive after all. If she hadn't found Hermione, she'd have been dead. Maybe this had a hand in it." She unfastened the clasp and placed it around her neck. Deanna stepped behind her and secured it, before lifting Luella's hair out of the way, allowing the necklace to fall into its proper position.

"There!" said Deanna in satisfaction, moving around to face her friend. "You're armoured and ready to go."

Rianne surveyed her with a critical eye. "Suits you. At least when we all get killed, you'll die looking amazing. Marlie will be pleased. Nothing more upsetting at a funeral than a badly dressed corpse."

"Rianne, stop being so morbid." snapped Luella, not wishing to be reminded that they could all be joining Ginny dead on the floor of the Chamber if they weren't careful. "We're going to make it."

Deanna, who had been staring into the distance, suddenly held up a finger, motioning for them to be quiet.

"What's up?" whispered Rianne.

"Voices." murmured Deanna. "Coming from that way."

Luella listened too. Sure enough, she could make out the sound of people talking drifting towards them from up the corridor.

"Let's go."

As they drew nearer, the voices seemed to have a kind of echo to them. Luella realised with a start that they were coming from Moaning Myrtle's toilet. But the speakers weren't ghosts.

"In there." she whispered to Deanna. Her friend drew her wand, stepped forward and with one fluid move, kicked the door open and strode in.

"Freeze." she said calmly. "Or you'll wish the Heir had got you... hello?" She lowered her wand. Before her were Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Moaning Myrtle and Gilderoy Lockhart. Myrtle, who had been perched on a cistern, looking over Harry's shoulder,

took one look at Deanna, shrieked, and dived down the toilet. Deanna had that effect on non-Slytherin ghosts, for some reason.

Ron looked up, saw who it was, and smiled, a rather cold, cruel smile.

"Cool. Reinforcements."

Harry, who had been staring intently at one of the taps, looked up in surprise.
"Deanna?"

Deanna sighed and turned to her friends. "It's alright. Only Harry and Ron. You can put your wands away."

She stepped aside as Luella and Rianne came in. Harry took one look at Luella, resplendent in her fighting gear, and raced over to her.

"Lu!" he yelled, overjoyed to see her again. "You're here!"

"I'm here." Luella smiled as the two of them hugged. "You really think I'd miss out on the action?"

"No, but..." Harry shook his head, unable to stop smiling. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again."

Luella just grinned. "Lots of people make that mistake. Lucius Malfoy, for one."

"Are you going after him too?" Harry asked.

"Maybe. Not yet."

"When you do... can I watch?"

Luella laughed. "If you like." She looked over his shoulder and saw Ron, who had the grace to look away, embarrassed.

"What's the matter, Weasley?" she said softly, remembering the letter she'd received from Deanna not long after returning home, informing her just who it was who'd betrayed her. "Heir of Slytherin got your tongue?"

Swallowing, Ron approached her, still not looking her in the eye. "Sorry." he whispered.

"Didn't quite hear that, Ron." Luella cupped her ear.

"I said, sorry." he repeated. "I should never have gone to Malfoy. I was an idiot, and if you'd still been here, Ginny and Hermione might have been OK." He looked at Luella's Mark. "Harry was right, wasn't he? The Second Heir's one of the good guys, isn't she?"

Luella just nodded.

"And it really is you, isn't it?" Ron continued, not taking his eyes off the caduceus etched on her skin.

Luella nodded again.

"I am such a prat." said Ron quietly.

"Yes. You are." said Luella.

Ron finally dared to meet Luella's eyes. "Can you... I mean, will you... Will you help me find my sister?"

Luella nodded. "Yes, alright. I will. But not for your sake. For hers. Because I like Ginny, and she doesn't deserve to get caught up in all this." She gave Ron a very hard stare indeed. "Be thankful, Ron Weasley. I'm not one to bear grudges, and right now, I have more important things on my mind than vengeance on you. Besides, you're really not worth bothering with."

Lockhart, who up to this point had been lurking at the edge of the room, decided that now was time to make his get away.

"Well, you don't seem to need me anymore, I'll just be on my way... ah."

Rianne had stepped into his path, blocking the doorway and his only escape route.

"Going somewhere, Gilderoy?" she drawled, the tip of her wand inches from his face.

"Er, no, no, not at all." he stammered. "Just your friends here wanted me along, but if there's the two of you and the Second Heir of Slytherin too, you won't be needing me..." He made to move past her, but Rianne was having none of it. She blocked him at once, her wand now actually touching him.

"What do we do with him, Lu?" she called out.

"Well, he's not going anywhere." said Luella decisively. "He knows too much. Suppose he'll have to either stay here immobilised or come with us."

"I'm for immobilisation." Deanna volunteered. "Don't want him getting in the way, offering constructive advice on the best way to kill a Basilisk."

Lockhart nearly jumped out of his skin at this. "A... a Basilisk?" he stammered, trembling. He clutched his chest. "Oh my heart, my poor heart."

"Oh shut up." snapped Rianne. She turned to Harry. "Why'd you bring him along anyway?"

Harry was about to explain what had really happened, but Ron interrupted him.

"Human shield." said Ron promptly.

Rianne's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, I see. A decoy. Good thinking. You're obviously smarter than you look."

"Blimey." said Deanna. "A use for Gilderoy Lockhart. Who'd have thought it?"

"Who indeed." Luella remarked. She turned to Harry. "So where is the Chamber anyway? Any ideas? I'm sure it's around here, but unless it's opened, I have no idea."

Harry patted the sink. "Right here. We found out the girl who died last time was found in the toilets. So we thought, who do we know who died in a toilet? And the answer was..."

"Moaning Myrtle!" Luella said, enlightenment dawning. "You mean, it's right here?"

Harry nodded. "Yep. Right behind this very sink. There's a picture of a snake on one of the taps, we think that if you say something in Parseltongue it'll open."

"Ingenious." murmured Luella. She fixed Harry with a penetrating stare. "So if that's all it takes, why haven't you opened it yet?"

"Ah. Er..." Harry began, before Ron interrupted.

"He had performance anxiety, and couldn't manage it." Ron informed her, smirking slightly as Rianne and Deanna began to snicker behind him. "You might have to give him a hand."

Deanna had to sit down after hearing that, while Rianne looked like she was in pain. Luella glared furiously at them.

"Will you two cut it out?" she yelled at them. "We're on a serious, life or death mission here and all you can do is snigger at double entendres?"

"Sorry." sniggered Deanna.

"I should hope so too. Ri, Lockhart's making another bid for freedom."

Surely enough, Lockhart was taking advantage of the distraction to head for the door. Swearing, Rianne pointed her wand at the door.

"*Via Interdictus!*"

The door swung shut and magically sealed itself as Lockhart got to it. Try as he might, he couldn't get it open.

"That's better." said Luella. She turned back to Harry, who had gone a deep shade of vermillion and was looking daggers at Ron. "So the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is hidden inside a girls' toilet?"

"That's right." said Harry, with as much dignity as he could muster.

Luella looked the sink up and down. "Well, at least he had a sense of humour. Better do it then, hadn't we?"

This time, no one laughed, although the corners of Deanna's mouth twitched a bit. The prospect of actually going into the Chamber of Secrets was something that could kill levity faster than a Misery Potion. Steeling herself, Luella approached the tap, and spoke, the Parseltongue coming as effortlessly to her as if it were her mother tongue.

"*Open up in the name of Morgan. The Second Heir demands entrance.*" They all caught their breath as the sink began to move. Shaking and juddering as the tap began to spin, the whole basin began to sink into the ground with a noise that was probably audible all over Hogwarts. Luella clasped her hands to her ears. There went the element of surprise. Ah well. They were probably expected anyway.

The sink disappeared into the floor, leaving a four-foot wide hole in the wall, which on closer inspection proved to be a giant pipe winding away into the depths of the castle.

"Gods all mighty, what is that smell?" gasped Rianne, trying not to gag.

"I don't know. I don't want to know." said Ron weakly. "Look at the slime, though, we're going to get filthy." He shivered. "Tell you what, Harry, if we survive this, my mum is going to kill me."

"Good thing we didn't bring Marlie after all." commented Deanna. "She'd never have gone down there, not in a million years."

"Yeah, but hey, look on the bright side." grinned Rianne. "Lockhart has to." She indicated to where a repulsed Gilderoy Lockhart was vomiting into a sink.

Luella stepped up to the pipe, glancing ruefully at her vest. "Looks like I picked the wrong day to wear white." she sighed. She turned to Harry. "Well? Shall we go?"

Harry was looking pale, but nothing was going to shift the determination in his eyes.

"Let's do it." he said quietly. And with that, he climbed into the hole and slid away.

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The tunnel proved to be less threatening than it had appeared from the outside. Once you were in, you didn't have time to feel nervous. In fact, it reminded Harry of all the times he'd been on the helter skelter at the local fairground as a kid, apart from the fact that this time he didn't have Dudley at his back, kicking him in the head and shoulders because he wasn't going fast enough.

Finally, the pipe spat him out into a horizontal tunnel which seemed to wind its way into the very depths of the castle. Dark. Very dark.

"*Lumos.*" he whispered, pointing his wand into the distance. The wandlight revealed nothing. If this was the Chamber, he didn't think much of it.

He cried out as a large, fast-moving weight crashed into his legs. Stepping back, rubbing his calf muscles in pain, he turned to see a black and denim bundle on the ground at the end of the pipe, which on closer inspection proved to be Luella.

Reaching out his hands, he pulled her to her feet. She was covered in water, dust and slime, although her cloak seemed to have taken the worst of it. Harry watched as she pushed the hair out of her eyes and tried ineffectually to smarten herself up.

"Yeuch." she breathed. "I look hideous. Couldn't Salazar have picked somewhere a bit more salubrious to have his evil lair?"

"You look fine." Harry told her, and meant it. She was still pretty, despite the grubbiness. Besides, a quick look at his own clothes confirmed he looked no better than she did.

Luella raised an eyebrow but didn't get time to answer. Another bundle had shot out of the pipe, rolling over and coming to a halt.

"Oh gods." it moaned. "Oh gods, oh gods, no."

Lockhart. Harry, by now beginning to regret ever having involved him, sighed and walked over, giving the once glamourous professor a hand up. He was by now sobbing uncontrollably.

"My robes, my robes, my beautiful robes!" he wept. "These were Stormosi di Milano originals! And now look at them! Ruined!"

He did have a point. The velvet purple and heliotrope robes were splattered from head to foot in slime, the silk cloak was in rags, and the hat seemed to have disappeared.

"Oh, shut up." Harry told him. "I'll buy you some new ones if it means that much to you."

"Anyway," Luella added with a grin as she joined Harry, "there's far more important things to worry about."

"Like what?" asked Lockhart.

Luella's grin widened. "You haven't seen what's happened to your hair."

Lockhart shrieked and clapped his hands to his head, grimacing as he realised his fingers had entangled themselves in the untidy, slimy mess that had once been his immaculately groomed hair. Sinking to his knees, he howled his grief out for all to hear.

Ron was next to arrive. Picking himself up, he glared at Lockhart.

"Might have known it was him. What happened, did he break a nail or something?"

"He's having a bad hair day." Luella explained.

"My heart bleeds for him." Ron responded testily. He looked around. "Is this it then? I'd expected it to look bigger."

"We're not there yet." snapped Luella. "It's down there somewhere." She indicated the tunnel winding into the darkness. Ron followed her gaze and shivered.

"Dark, isn't it?"

"Dark?" hissed Luella. "Of course it's bloody dark! It's an underground passage way, what did you expect it to look like? Marble floor with rose petals scattered over it? Solid gold handrails at the side? Silken tapestries lining the walls? A red carpet rolled out with a big sign saying "Chamber of Secrets this way"?"

"Don't be silly." growled Ron. "All the same though, I was expecting some torches on the walls."

"Wuss." Luella told him. "Switch your wandlight on if it bothers you that much." They all looked at his wand, held together with Spellotape and looking more like a children's party entertainer's wand than that of a proper wizard.

"Actually, maybe not." said Luella hastily. She drew her own wand and cast the Lumos charm as Rianne arrived.

"Well, wasn't that fun?" she gasped as Harry and Ron helped her up. "Novel, I'll give it that." She looked around. "What, no statues of His Most High Slytherinness? How disappointing. I always thought Salazar was more of a megalomaniac than that."

"This isn't it." seethed Luella. "It's that way."

"What, more walking?" sighed Rianne. "Now if Salazar was any kind of proper villain, he'd have laid on some transport. Either that or his minions would have found us by now and we'd be hanging head first over the piranha pit."

"Wouldn't snakes be more appropriate?" Harry asked.

"Nah, his worst enemies would have the power to negotiate with them." Rianne responded. "Although knowing him, he'd do it anyway just for the show, leaving a great big Achilles Gonads like most Evil Overlords do."

"Don't you mean Achilles Heel?" asked Luella. Rianne just looked at her rather strangely.

"Lu, no one ever won a fight by kicking someone in the heel." She turned as Deanna slid into view. "Not even Tyler."

"What about me?" Deanna asked as she scrambled to her feet. She looked around her. "You know, this isn't how I remember it. It was bigger in Marlie's dream."

"For the last time." sighed Luella. "We're not there yet! It's down thataway."

Deanna looked suspiciously down the tunnel. "Oh dear. That looks ominous. Everybody watch where you're treading, there'll be booby traps everywhere."

At this, Lockhart gave a little yelp and headed for the pipe. Rianne and Ron grabbed his arms.

"Oh no you don't." snapped Ron, thrusting him forward. "You're going first."

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Deanna turned out to be right, and yet also wrong. True, the tunnel was infested with booby traps. However, whoever had designed them had forgotten that they'd have to wait over a thousand years before anyone passed that way.

So it was that when Ron, bringing up the rear, trod on the wrong part of the floor and twelve rather nasty looking spears shot up from the floor, tragedy was avoided by the fact that they only went up six inches before grinding to a halt.

Harry inspected the spears.

"You know, Lu, as booby traps go, that's not very impressive."

Rianne knelt down and examined them. "They're all rusty." She looked up, grinning. "Machinery must have fallen apart from lack of maintenance."

Ron burst out laughing. "You what? You mean Salazar Slytherin set up all these elaborate defences to keep people out, and they've stopped working due to old age? Oh, that's brilliant. Just too amazing for words!"

"Isn't it just?" Rianne got to her feet. "Tyler, I think we can safely stop worrying. These traps are no danger to anyone."

Deanna immediately stopped pointing her wand at Lockhart's head. "In that case, our brave leaders Harry and Lu can take the lead. Let's keep our decoy for the Basilisk, shall we?"

And so it proved. The crossbows with the poisoned bolts didn't shoot properly and the bolts remained wedged in the crossbows, the slab of rock that lowered from the ceiling to try and trap them stopped halfway, and although they had a bit of a scare when the gigantic ball that rolled down the passageway proved to work just fine, the concealed pit full of long-dead venomous snakes turned out to be just big enough for the ball to fill up entirely, neutralising two traps in one go.

By the time they got to the final turn of the passageway then, the little party was in a jubilant mood. If the traps were in that poor a condition, what would the Chamber itself be like? Deanna and Ron began joking about a Basilisk with its teeth falling out and arthritis in its spine, and an Heir of Slytherin with a Zimmer frame.

"Let's face it, Tyler, this could be the easiest fight of our lives!" enthused Ron. "We might not even need to feed Lockhart to the snake!"

Deanna pouted. "Ohhh. I was looking forward to that. Can we feed him to the snake anyway? Poor thing must be hungry after all that time."

"Oh, alright then." Ron grinned. "We might have to cut him up for it though."

"Not a problem." smiled Deanna, flexing her wand.

"Cut it out you two." said Luella absently. "Snakes don't need to chew anyway, they can unlock their jaws and swallow their prey whole." She stopped short as they arrived at their destination. Up ahead were two huge doors with the familiar symbol of the caduceus twinkling in the gloom. No doubt about it. They'd made it.

Everyone fell silent, the levity gone. The doors didn't look as if they'd aged a day since Salazar built them. All thoughts of a Basilisk with false teeth and an Heir with a Zimmer frame vanished as the memory of what the Heir was capable of returned. The illusion of an easy victory slithered away and died a quiet death in the shadows.

"Looks like we made it." Harry whispered. Leaving the others, he approached the doors and looked them up and down. No handle. No lock. He gave them a little push. No response.

Luella walked up behind him and joined him. As she did so, her foot touched yet another trap activator buried in the floor. This time, a segment of the roof above her moved, revealing a pile of rocks poised to fall down and bury the unwary. However, despite shifting a little, they stayed put. Luella breathed a sigh of relief and walked on.

"Well?" she asked Harry. "Now what do we do?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't know. There's no way of opening these doors that I can see. Unless..." He looked at the snakes again. "Unless we need to use Parseltongue again."

"Worth a try." Luella drew her wand and was about to speak, when a scuffle behind her caught both their attentions.

They turned to see a fight in full swing. The sight of actually seeing the Chamber doors had obviously been too much for Lockhart, and his nerve had finally snapped. Somehow or other, he'd managed to get Ron's wand off him and was successfully using the boy as a human shield against a livid Rianne and Deanna.

"Let go of him!" yelled Deanna. "Or you *will* regret it!"

"Sorry, my dear, no can do." sighed Lockhart. "I've really got no intention of ending my days as snakefood, thank you very much. Awfully sorry about this, children, but you've left me no option. I shall have to cast Memory Charms on you all, take you all back, explain that I was too late to save the girl, and that you all lost your minds at the sight of her mangled remains." He leered at the furious Slytherins. "My apologies, dears. You've been.... *interesting*... to teach." He raised Ron's wand. "*Obliviate!*"

"No!" screamed Luella, suddenly realising what Lockhart had not. "The roof's unstable, you'll kill us all!"

She was too late. The wand exploded, sending Lockhart and Ron flying backwards, and causing the hex to misfire. It hit the landslide trap, dislodging one vital piece of stone. Before their very eyes, the entire roof caved in, tons of rock pouring out into the passageway, filling it up from floor to ceiling and causing Harry and Luella to fling themselves to the floor. Finally it stopped. The two teenagers looked up. The way back was blocked entirely. But that wasn't what upset Luella the most.

"Oh god." she whispered. "Oh my god. *DEANNA!*" she screamed, racing back to the landslide. "Deanna, talk to me, can you hear me, *are you alright?*"

"We're fine." came the muffled response. "Well, Ri, Ron and me are, anyway. Lockhart's not so good though. He got caught in the explosion and can't remember his own name."

"Name?" Lockhart's voice, stripped of all the false pretence and cowardice, actually sounded rather pleasant, if a little camp. "I have a name?" A pause. "What is it, dear girl?"

"Gilderoy, your name's Gilderoy." Ron could be heard telling him.

"Gilderoy? Are you sure?" Lockhart sounded rather dubious at this. "Not sure I like that at all. Sounds rather over the top, I must say. Are you sure I can't have something a little plainer?"

"Get this in writing, Rianne, it may not happen again." Ron said, sounding altogether happier than he had any right to be under the circumstances. Luella ignored them and turned her attention back to Deanna.

"Any way you can get through?" she called.

"I don't know." came the answer. "I think so, but it could take a while."

"We'll manage." Rianne interrupted. "Deanna and I aren't joint Slytherin House Jenga champions for no reason. We'll get through this. Are you and Harry OK?"

"We're fine." Harry answered. "Do you want us to dig from this end?"

"No!" shouted Deanna and Rianne together.

"No time!" snapped Rianne. "Ginny's in danger, every second wasted is one too many. Leave it too long and the Heir might kill her."

"She's right." came Deanna's voice, sounding unbearably sad. "You two'll have to go it alone."

"No." whispered Luella, realising with a jolt how much she'd been counting on having the others alongside her. "No, I can't do it alone, I need you guys with me!"

"I wish we were with you too." said Deanna. "But there it is, we're not. You've got Harry with you anyhow. Do what you can, we'll come through and join you as soon as we can. Is Harry there?"

"I'm here." called Harry.

"Great. Harry, listen. It's just you and Lu now. We'll do our best to get through and help you, but we don't guarantee anything. Stay on your guard, keep your wands with you, and *trust no one*." Deanna had never sounded so insistent before. "Ron, want to say anything?"

"Yeah." Ron's voice sounded strangely muffled despite the tons of rock in the way. "Just... good luck, Harry. You too, Luella. And... if it's too late... or if you can't save her..." there was a pause, where it seemed as if Ron was trying to maintain his composure, "don't blame yourselves."

Harry felt a lump building in his throat himself as Ron said this. "Thanks." he managed to stammer. He felt Luella tap him on the shoulder.

"Come on." she said gently. "We've got no time to lose." Final goodbyes were exchanged before the two remaining children approached the doors.

They came to a halt, the two snakes seeming to stare down at them somehow. Impulsively, Harry reached for Luella's hand and squeezed it. She returned the gesture.

"Well, Lu, looks like it's just you and me." he whispered.

Luella managed a smile. "Maybe it's for the best. After all the prophecy only mentioned you and me. This feels..." she groped for the right words, "right. Well, not right. But... *inevitable*."

Harry had to agree. He could practically feel the hand of Fate on his shoulder. He looked back at the doors. "Do you want to do it or shall I?"

"I opened the other entrance."

"But it's your Chamber."

"Tell you what," said Luella. "Let's do it together. On the count of three. One... two... three."

"*Open up.*" they both said together. To their ears, it sounded no different to English. But it worked. The doors swung open to reveal a huge torchlit chamber, with twin rows of pillars holding up a gothic roof that wouldn't have looked out of place in any of Britain's cathedrals. In fact, the whole thing looked like a huge, evil cathedral to some dark deity best not named.

"Ready?" whispered Luella.

"Ready."

Holding hands, the two of them went in to face destiny.

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Their footsteps echoed around the Chamber, disrupting the silence. Harry kept looking around him, alert for the first sign of movement, but there was none. There was more life in a tomb than here. Harry fervently hoped that this place wouldn't end up as one. Still, there seemed to be no one here. No Heir. No Basilisk. No Ginny.

"Where are they?" Harry whispered.

"I don't know." Luella replied. "Keep looking."

Harry did, but still no sign of anyone.

"Are your Redeemer powers telling you anything?"

"Nothing concrete. My Mark's prickling, telling me to beware. But it's not telling me what or where the danger is."

"Your Mark?" Harry looked at Luella, and noticed for the first time the sign of the caduceus on her arm. "Where'd you get that??"

"It appeared when the Chamber first opened. It's the sign of Morgan Tal-y-Rhys, remember I told you about her?" Luella indicated the pillars, all of which had snakes wrapped around them. "It warns me of things sometimes. Burns whenever the Chamber opens, although when we did it, it only went warm, it didn't hurt."

"Wow." Harry whispered. He paused. "What's it saying now?"

"The Heir's around, I know that much. I can sense him, and I think he can sense me too." She looked around, worried. "No sign of him though. Deanna mentioned that this place had a statue of Salazar Slytherin at the end. Let's make for that."

"Deanna's been here?" asked Harry, his mind now really confused. "When?"

"In a dream." said Luella. "She nearly didn't make it back either. Hope we have better luck."

The conversation fell quiet after that. It didn't seem right to speak when it was so quiet. At length, the statue Luella had spoken of loomed into view. And curled up at its foot like some human sacrifice, was the black-clad, red-haired figure of Ginny Weasley. She wasn't moving.

"Ginny!" gasped Harry, breaking loose from Luella's grasp and racing to her side. "Are you OK?"

Ginny didn't answer. Turning her over, Harry saw that her eyes were closed. "Gin, wake up!" he urged her. "We've got to get out of here!"

Luella arrived next to him, helping him to lift Ginny into a sitting position. She felt for Ginny's pulse.

"Alive." she announced. "But only just. Dumbledore was right, we're only just in time." She shrieked suddenly, dropping Ginny and clasping her Mark. Harry laid Ginny back down and reached for his wand, which he'd left lying on the floor when he'd picked Ginny up. It wasn't there.

"My wand's gone!" he gasped.

"What do you mean, gone?" snapped Luella. "You had it when we came in, what've you done with it?"

"I don't know, I left it right here, I'm sure I did!" said Harry, frantically searching around for it, with no luck.

"Looking for something?" came a voice. Both Harry and Luella turned around.

Standing by a pillar, leaning up against it, was a tall, dark-haired, strangely attractive young boy of about sixteen, twirling Harry's wand in his hands. Harry recognised him at once.

"Tom!" he cried, relieved at the boy's familiar presence. He held out his hand for his wand. "Hey, thanks for finding it, I thought I'd lost it..." His voice trailed off as he realised Tom hadn't moved. "Tom?" he asked, starting to sense that all was not well.

"Harry," said Luella in a strangled voice, "do you know this man?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, he's the spirit of the diary, Tom Riddle. He showed me what happened the night they caught Hagrid. Tom, this is Luella, a friend of mine."

"I know." came the response. "And I think she knows who I am too."

Sure enough, Luella was getting to her feet, teeth gritted and wand at the ready.

"Stay back." she snarled. "Put the wand down, and stay well away from us."

Harry looked at her, perplexed. Why was Luella being so hostile? Tom had stopped the attacks first time around, surely he would help them now.

"What's up, Lu?" he asked. "Tom's on our side. He showed me what happened fifty years ago when the monster was loose last time."

"What, all of it?" smiled Luella thinly. "I doubt that very much."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry, suddenly getting a sinking feeling that he didn't know the half of it.

Luella had by now turned her attention to Tom.

"Give it back to him." she said quietly. "Give the wand back, and get into that diary. Now."

"And if I don't?" Tom leered at her. "What will you do? Try your fancy little fairy tricks on me? They don't work on non-corporeal forms, girl. And on Basilisks, not at all. Not when eye contact with it will kill you before you can say a word."

"Basilisk?" Harry looked from one to the other. "How did you know..? Lu, what's going on here?" He could feel the panic rising up inside him. Something was terribly wrong, and he was beginning to suspect just what it was. He turned back to Tom. "Who are you?"

"A memory." smiled Tom, but there was no affection there. Nothing but sheer, cold, triumphant evil. "Preserved in a diary for fifty years."

"But whose memory?" asked Harry.

"You know who." smiled Tom, seeming highly amused at something Harry could only begin to fathom.

"I know." said Luella, stepping forward, wand in hand. "And it's time you went back to being just that... a memory. *Stupefy!*"

The Stunning Charm flew straight at Tom, who didn't even try to dodge it. Instead it just flew straight through him and into the far wall.

"You'll have to do better than that." Tom remarked. "Honestly, I'd expected a bit more of a challenge from the Second Heir. Morgan must be turning in her grave."

"Of course." sighed Luella. "He's got no separate physical existence so magic doesn't work on him. Stupid, Lu, stupid!" She smacked her forehead in annoyance at her own lack of foresight, before looking around and noticing the small black diary lying forgotten on the floor. The diary... In a flash it came to her. The only physical connection he had with the world was through that diary. So, maybe if she severed that connection somehow... Of course, she had no idea how. But anything was worth a try. Slowly, trying to be discreet, she aimed her wand at the diary.

"*Accio!*" The diary flew into her hands, causing Tom to clutch at his left forearm and scream in pain.

"Damn you!" he hissed, somehow managing to fight off the pain and point Harry's wand at her. "You'll pay for that, Redeemer! *Avada Kedavra!*"

Luella tried to dodge, cursing her luck. She was surely on the right track, and if she could just evade... But it was too late. The hex hit her full on, sending her flying back into the wall. Eyes closed, she slid to the ground and fell into a heap, face downwards, hair obscuring her features, collapsing without a sound. She didn't move.

"Lu..." Harry croaked, hoping beyond hope that she was OK, even as his instincts told him otherwise. He spun round to face Tom. "What have you done to her?" he yelled.

Tom just shrugged. "Such a shame, I'd preferred a bit more of a fight than that. I'd been told that the Slytherin Redeemer would prove more of a challenge. A formidable sorceress of great skill and power, so I was told. And she goes down at the first hurdle. What a waste. Ah well." He turned back to Harry with a flourish, taking a step forwards. "It was you I was interested in, anyway. No mystery about her, not if you know the prophecy. You, on the other hand..." His blue eyes fixed Harry with an unholy, almost hungry, look. "A mere baby, and yet you managed to bring down the Dark Lord. It is a puzzle most strange..." His voice trailed off as he approached Harry, those hungry eyes of his not leaving him for a moment as he reached out and trailed an almost solid finger down Harry's face.

"What do you want?" whispered Harry, shaking all over. He could feel tears pricking at his eyeballs, and yet he was determined not to cry. Besides, he could feel another emotion trying to get out, a wave of livid fury threatening to overcome him and send him going straight for Riddle's throat. "Who are you? And what does Lord Voldemort have to do with this?"

Tom fixed him with a penetrating stare. "Everything, Harry Potter. Everything." He lifted his wand - Harry's wand - and made his full name appear on the air in front of him, little golden letters spelling the words "TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE".

"Lord Voldemort," Tom said softly, very deliberately so that Harry could hear every word, "is my past, present and future. Observe." He tapped the letters, and Harry watched in awe and horror as they rearranged themselves into the dread words "I AM LORD VOLDEMORT".

Harry felt himself go numb, the truth suddenly blindingly obvious. Luella had known, must have done. Riddle was Voldemort, and must have been using the diary to attack students all along. Someone must have found the diary, written in it not realising who it had once belonged to and fallen under its spell. Harry looked once more at Ginny's prone form and realised who it must have been. Poor Ginny, alone in a hostile world, rejected and frightened, would have been easy prey for anyone offering a shoulder to cry on.

"You bastard." he whispered. "You complete and utter... As if attempted murder's not enough, you have to get some innocent young kid to do your dirty work for you!" he yelled at Tom. "You bastard!"

"Actually, my parents were married in a perfectly respectable church ceremony." Tom observed coolly. "And young Virginia's not that innocent." His smile turned into a leer that left Harry feeling sickened. "At least, not any more."

"You..." Harry whispered savagely, taking a step forward, clenching and unclenching his fists. He only just managed to control himself. "Let her go! You don't need her any more. You've got what you wanted, I'm at your mercy, Lu's..." he choked on the word, refusing to admit that she might be dead, "out of action, you don't need her! Just send her home. She's suffered enough."

"Not yet." said Tom smoothly. "I still need her for a little longer. Just long enough to take her life force and use it to help me take possession of your friend's body. I was

going to have yours, but I daresay hers will do as well. Now, while we're waiting, why don't you tell me how you managed to escape me eleven years ago? Avada Kedavra's never failed before."

Harry felt his knees go weak at the admission that the Avada Kedavra's sole intention was to kill and that, by implication, Luella wasn't coming back. No, no, no, was all he wanted to scream, and yet he didn't. He felt himself detaching, felt himself go into autopilot, and felt the words come through him rather than from him.

"It failed because of love. Because my mother loved me, and because she wouldn't give me up to save her life. She died defending me, and it meant you couldn't kill me. Because love is stronger than death, and it takes more than power or heritage to make a truly great wizard. Without love, you're nothing. *You are nothing!*" He spat the last sentence at him with a contempt stronger than any Basilisk's venom.

Tom blinked, clearly taken aback. But he regained himself, his face a contorted mask of fury.

"What did you say?" he hissed.

"You heard me." Harry heard himself say. "You're nothing! You're just a ghost in a diary, with no friends, no allies, no one who you haven't forced or tricked into helping you. Luella might be dead..." There it was. He'd finally forced himself to admit it, and yet it hadn't devastated him as much as he'd thought. Give it time though. When the adrenaline had worn off. "... but she was twice the witch you are. You can kill me if you like, but it won't change anything! You're still a pathetic excuse for a wizard, and you'll never be as good as Albus Dumbledore!"

Where had that come from? Harry wondered. He didn't know, and right now, had other things to think about. Tom had lifted the stolen wand in rage, preparing to fling a curse at Harry, but had halted in mid-hex, distracted by a flare of light at the far end of the Chamber.

Harry looked. What appeared to be a ball of fire had materialised at the end of the room and was flying towards them, accompanied by the most unearthly, spine-tingling music. For a split second, Harry wondered if perhaps Deanna, Ron and Rianne had managed to break through and were even now on the attack. However, any thought of reinforcements was dispelled as the fireball arrived on the scene, circled three times and came to land on Harry's shoulder, dropping a soft, triangular piece of cloth at his feet. It was Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix. And the thing he'd been carrying was the Sorting Hat.

Tom was shaking his head, smiling again. "So that's what Dumbledore sends his followers!" he laughed. "The old school Sorting Hat and a glorified songbird! Dear oh dear, what useless talismans you Gryffindors use. Salazar was rather more practical in his choice of gifts. As you are about to find out." He turned towards the statue, meeting its pitiless gaze with the arrogance of one sure of his destiny. "*Speak to me Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!*"

Harry stumbled backwards as the statue's mouth opened. Fawkes took flight with a screech of alarm, circling around the eaves of the chamber. Don't leave me, Harry silently begged it. And yet, what use was a phoenix against the King of Serpents?

His impulse was to run, but he couldn't abandon Ginny to her fate. She was still alive, there might yet be hope. And besides, if he ran now, that was it. Tom would have won. Ginny would be doomed to having the life sucked out of her, Luella's body would be Tom's for the taking, and Lord Voldemort would be able to walk the earth again. No, he couldn't let that happen.

But he didn't know what else to do. And as a serpentine shape emerged out of the darkness, its deadly gaze flickering around the room before settling on Harry, all he could do was shut his eyes as a defence before turning and running, with the awful hissing of the Serpent King and the even more awful taunts of Tom Riddle ringing in his ears, daring him to turn and face them and in doing so, meet his end.

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Chapter Twenty Eight The Phoenix Effect

"Wake up."

The girl's voice nagged insistently at her, combining urgency and petulance in a way that only Marlie Lovegood had ever yet got away with.

"You must wake up."

Now it bore all the hallmarks of a command. Was this boot camp or something? Not even Caitlin was ever as authoritative as this.

"Why?" she muttered.

"There's danger out there!"

"So what," she muttered, wanting to go back to sleep. The bed she was tucked in was warm and comfortable, and she liked it here. She didn't want to move.

The other girl was having none of it.

"Wake up now!"

Luella's eyes flew open. She was awake, forced out of womblike oblivion into an all too real state of wakefulness. She rubbed her head, yawning. Something had hit her, she was sure of it, but she couldn't remember what. Felt like it had been a truck. Blinking, she looked about her.

She was in Marlie's bedroom. In a flash, her delirium cleared and she remembered what had happened. Riddle had hexed her in the Chamber of Secrets and she'd been knocked out. So why was she here, of all places?

"Am I dead?" she wondered out loud.

"No," came the girl's voice again. "But you had a very lucky escape."

Luella turned to face the speaker. "Marls?" she gasped. "Shouldn't you be Petrified?"

The girl turned to look at her with a faintly amused smile. Luella shrank back as she caught the girl's eyes. She was a dead ringer for Marlie... but with those jet black eyes there was no mistaking the two of them. This wasn't Marlie... and yet, they could have been sisters.

"She is," came the reply, followed by a girlish laugh. "But part of her's still very much at large. She may have mentioned me before now. I am Morticia."

"Morticia..." Enlightenment dawned as Luella recognised the name. "You're her dark twin, you live inside the necklace!" She looked around her. "I'm in the necklace?"

"Sort of," Morticia replied. "You became psychically linked to it the moment you put it on. And a very good thing you did too. If you hadn't been wearing it, that curse would have killed you."

"What?" gasped Luella. "But how... I mean, what... How am I still alive then?" she demanded.

Morticia sat back, all clinical detachment. "You are aware of the principle of inoculation."

"Of course I am, we did all the cowpox-smallpox vaccine thing back in primary school," snapped Luella.

"Good," smiled Morticia. "Then you can work out that this operates on the same kind of principle. Suffice it to say you were stunned but otherwise unharmed. But to work. We don't have much time. Harry still needs your help."

Luella realised with a start that Harry must still be in the Chamber, alone with Voldemort. "Oh my god, is he OK?"

"For now," replied Morticia. "But we need to help him - he won't manage it alone. And luckily for us, we have a secret weapon." She moved aside to reveal Marlie's plasma globe. It looked normal enough, except for one thing - the luminous plasma within was not its usual pinky-purple, but an angry and poisonous looking green.

"What happened to it?" gasped Luella. Morticia just smiled.

"It's our secret weapon. Kept safe until we're ready to use it. And now, my dear, it's time you went back," She raised Marlie's willow wand. "*Enervate!*"

The charm hit Luella, sending her flying out of Marlie's bed and towards the floor - except it wasn't there. Instead, there was this inky blackness, an endless tunnel into which she found herself falling headlong, tumbling head over heels, over and over and over again until...

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Until she hit solid earth with a nauseating thud and opened her eyes. She was awake again, back in the Chamber, and aching all over. She was going to have bruises down her back for days, she just knew it.

That's if she made it at all.

Leaning up on one elbow, trying to look inconspicuous, she glanced around the Chamber, searching for Tom and Harry. They weren't hard to spot. She bit her lip to stop herself screaming as she watched the Basilisk bear down on Harry, with what looked like a phoenix hovering around its eyes, which, she noticed, were streaming with blood and various other fluids. No danger there!

But she'd spoken too soon. The snake lunged towards the boy, teeth bared, blind but still poisonous. Harry, not flinching for a second, produced a sword which Luella couldn't even begin to imagine how he'd found, and thrust it straight into the Basilisk's throat.

The beast howled in pain as it collapsed, thrashing around for a few minutes before falling to the ground and lying still. Dead. Well, that was one menace out of the way. But Riddle was still there, and he was still armed with Harry's wand. And swords wouldn't work against him. Even now, he was stalking towards the boy, who was lying down as if exhausted, with the phoenix perched on his arm, almost as if it were watching over him.

Luella reached for her necklace, and noticed with a surprise that it was glowing bright green and moving of its own accord, as if it were struggling to get loose. She fingered the chain anxiously, hoping it wouldn't break. Morticia's voice hissed in her ear as she did so.

"Hurry up, I can't control this thing much longer! You know what to do!"

A memory surfaced, of Riddle hurling a curse at her and screaming "*Avada Kedavra!*" A curse accompanied by a silent rush of air and a horribly virulent green light. A green light exactly the same colour as the light coming from her necklace, that had been in the plasma globe.

Luella looked up and located the diary, lying a few feet away, where it had fallen as she'd slammed into the wall. Hoping that Tom would be too busy gloating over Harry to notice her, she pointed her wand at it and whispered "*Accio!*"

The diary slithered across the flagstones, into the waiting fingers of her right hand. But the use of magic had alerted Riddle, who turned from taunting Harry, clutching

his left forearm, his face clearly in agony. Good, about time he knew what it felt like, Luella couldn't help thinking.

"You!" he hissed, pain, fear and utter astonishment all over his face. "But you... you're dead... you must be! You have to be! Avada Kedavra's foolproof!"

"Yes," Luella smiled, getting to her feet and holding the diary high. "It is, isn't it?" Slowly, in a simple movement that seemed to take forever, she touched the tip of her wand to the necklace and felt the curse shoot into it. Now it was her wand that was glowing green and shaking uncontrollably. Luella gritted her teeth as she tried to hold on to it. It would never do for the wand to go flying out of her hand, not when she was so close to victory.

It seemed Fate was on her side. Concentrating every fibre of her being on the tip of her wand making contact with the diary, she tried to hold the wand still as she brought the diary slowly towards it, then tried to keep it from moving as the wand tip and book made contact, holding them together long enough for her to say the forbidden words.

"Avada Kedavra!"

The curse, finally free of its bonds, shot out of her wand and into the book with the force of a small explosion. Luella gasped as the diary flew out of her hand, and she found herself flying backwards again, propelled in the other direction by magic released in line with the laws of physics.

Tom dropped Harry's wand, convulsing in agony as he screamed a wordless cry of anger, hate, but mostly the sheer physical pain of the hex and his Mark burning. And then, after flickering for a bit, he was gone.

And then Harry was staggering to his feet, grabbing his wand and racing over to her, flinging his arms around her and gasping her name over and over again.

"Lu, you're OK, you're alive, you did it, oh Lu, thank god you're OK!"

Luella held him in her turn, scarcely able to believe it herself. Riddle was gone, truly gone. It had worked. She felt the necklace practically hum in jubilation, and her Mark was glowing fiercely, although not painfully so.

"I'm fine," she whispered. "We're all fine." She gazed into Harry's eyes, unable to stop smiling. He couldn't help himself either, despite being covered from head to toe in blood. She didn't want to think whose it might be.

"You killed the snake then," she said.

Harry nodded. "Yup. Thanks to Fawkes here." The phoenix fluttered down to land on Harry's shoulder, singing softly and nuzzling his ear.

"Yes, where did he come from?" Luella asked, remembering that Harry had acquired a sword from somewhere too. "And that sword?"

"He appeared after I called on Dumbledore," Harry explained. "Brought the Sorting Hat with him. He pecked out the eyes of the Basilisk so I could fight it, and when I put the Hat on and asked for help, it gave me a sword which I killed the Basilisk with."

"Dumbledore..." said Luella, remembering him telling he'd left magic of his own in the Chamber. "So that's what he meant!" she said happily. "He said he'd not been idle - now we know what he was up to."

They were interrupted by a noise from behind them. Harry let Luella go and spun round to face it, wand in one hand, sword in the other. Luella likewise retrieved her own wand from where it had fallen and turned to see.

It was Ginny, sitting upright and rubbing her eyes, looking about her, clearly terrified. As soon as she saw Harry and Luella with their wands drawn and a sword pointed at her, she burst into tears.

"I'm... I'm sorry!" she bawled. "I didn't mean to... to hurt those students! I didn't want to do it, but he - he made me! It was the diary, Lu, it's alive, it's evil, it took me over, made me do things, made me hurt Marlie and Hermione. Don't hurt me, please, I'm sorry!" She dissolved into incoherent sobs. Luella put her wand away and went straight to her, hugging the crying girl.

"Ssh, don't cry, it's alright," Luella tried to soothe her. "I know, I know all about it, I know what was going on. It's alright, you're OK, it's over."

Ginny cried even harder. "I'm so sorry!" she wept. "I wanted to tell someone, I really did, but I was so afraid they'd think I did it deliberately, and... and I was scared of what Tom might do to me... and then..." she swallowed, "then they expelled you, and I really was terrified and..." She stopped, unable to go on. Luella stroked her hair tenderly.

"Gin, don't worry. I don't blame you for that!" Luella told her. She gazed at the girl with kindness. "Voldie's evil, he's capable of anything. You were vulnerable anyway, you weren't to know. But Gin, promise me, next time anything like that happens, that you will tell someone! You could have gone to Snape, he knows his stuff, and as soon as he saw that diary, he would have known in a second what was happening. Go to him if you can, but if you can't, and you can't or won't go to your parents, or Ron, or Dumbledore or anyone else, come and find me or Marls or Deanna or Ri. We'll help you. Promise."

Ginny nodded mutely. "Thanks. I will," she whispered.

"Good. And another thing," Here Luella became rather sterner. "Don't nick our stuff again."

Ginny had the grace to look away guiltily. "Sorry," she whispered. "That was wrong, I know. But I didn't know what else to do! I was so scared you'd find out how to work it and know it was me."

"Yeah, and I already told you we'd give you the benefit of the doubt," sighed Luella. "Just... don't do it again! Talk to us! Deanna recognised the name immediately, she knew it was Voldemort's diary, no way would she have blamed you for anything it did."

"No," said Harry, joining in. "She wouldn't. And neither would I."

Ginny looked from one to the other for a brief moment then burst into tears again. This time however, it was out of relief. Luella didn't say anything more, she just held the girl tightly, letting her cry. Harry, not wanting to be left out and feeling in need of comforting himself, laid down his sword, put his wand away and joined the hug, putting his arms around both girls, who broke apart their own embrace to allow him to join in.

They'd been like that for what seemed like forever when their silent communion was broken by the sound of footsteps rushing towards them.

Deanna, Ron and Rianne had managed to dig through and were racing towards them, wands out and cloaks flying behind them.

"Lu! Are you OK?" cried Deanna as she skidded to a halt beside them.

"I'm fine," Luella nodded weakly as Deanna flung her arms round her. "I'm fine, mate."

"Ginny!" yelled Ron, looking as if he was about to cry from sheer relief. "You're alright!" He made to hug his baby sister, but she held him off, unable to meet his eyes.

"Gin?" Ron asked, perplexed. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Ginny just shook her head, unable to admit to Ron, of all people, what her part in it had been.

Rianne was busy looking around the Chamber. "So what happened then? This place looks like a reptilian abattoir." She indicated the remains of the Basilisk, covered in its own blood and stretched out across most of the width of the Chamber.

Ron also glanced around. "Hey, where's the Heir?" he asked, surprised. "I don't see a body anywhere."

Harry got up and retrieved the diary. "Here," he said woodenly, all emotion drained after the Basilisk fight.

Ron took the diary. "What, this?" he asked, confused. "A book? Heir of Slytherin? No way."

"Don't be too sure," Harry cautioned him. "Weren't you the one who told me that books could be dangerous? Turns out this one trumps the lot."

"It does?" Ron stared. "But... Riddle stopped the attacks last time, didn't he?"

"Yeah," said Luella. "Because he was the one who started them."

"What?" Ron's eyes bulged. "So... Hagrid's innocent?"

Luella and Harry both nodded.

"So... who was Riddle then?" Ron asked, scratching his head. "Because if he was that powerful, surely we'd have all heard of him."

"You have," Deanna told him. "Voldemort."

"What!?" Ron shrieked. "Tyler, you're kidding!"

Harry shook his head. "We're not. Look," He trailed his wand through the air, causing Riddle's full name to appear before them. Then, a tap of the wand caused them all to rearrange themselves into their evil anagram.

The others, including Luella who hadn't seen this earlier, all stared in varying degrees of astonishment. It was Rianne who finally broke the silence.

"Great," she sighed, with a hint of annoyance. "Not only is he a power hungry, ruthless, homicidal sadist, but he's also an anagram nerd," She shook her head. "Disturbing."

"And he was in that diary all along," Ron went pale, and dropped the diary as if he'd just found out it was radioactive. "Oh my god, Harry, we had that diary at one point. You were writing in it, talking to it... and it was You-Know-Who all along."

"If you think that's bad," Luella interrupted, "spare a thought for the poor, innocent youngster who happened upon the diary in the first place, didn't know what it was, starting writing to it and got taken over by him and made to do the attacks."

"Gods, yeah, poor thing," Ron said, sombre for once. "That must have been awful for them. Who was it? Anyone I know?"

All eyes turned to Ginny. Seeing that the game was up, Ginny swallowed and finally gathered her courage.

"Ron. Oh Ron," she choked. "It was me, Ron. I was the one attacking everyone. I didn't even know I was doing it at first, couldn't remember a thing. By the time I did, it was too late, Tom told me if I said anything I'd get in trouble, that no one would believe me, and that it might be someone I knew who was next..." Ginny choked on the words, hardly daring to see what Ron's reaction to all this was. "Ron, I'm so sorry, I really am!" She was in tears again, sobbing her heart out, convinced that this was it, that the reconciliation she'd managed to build with her brother must surely be lying in ruins at her feet by now.

With good reason. Ron was staring at her, unable to believe what he was hearing. All the colour had drained out of his face, and he looked like he was about to hit someone. Hard.

"It was you?" he whispered.

Ginny nodded, unable to say anything more.

"You Know Who... was using my baby sister... to try and kill people?"

Again, Ginny could only nod.

"The absolute bastard!" shouted Ron, his voice raising to a peak. "The complete and utter git!" He snatched the diary up and threw it at the nearest pillar before turning back to Ginny and, to everyone's surprise, not least Ginny's, flung his arms around her and gave her the biggest hug she'd had that evening, almost squeezing the life out of her in the process. "Ginny, ssh, don't cry, it's alright, it's over, you're safe, I'm here, don't worry, sis."

"Oh Ron!" Ginny sobbed. "I was so scared! I didn't know what to do." She looked up at him, tears still glistening on her cheeks. "I'm really sorry. If... if you want to disown me again... I won't mind."

"Disown you?" Ron shook his head, gazing at her with the big brother tenderness that was always there deep down, had always been there, but didn't always know how to show itself. "After what you've been through? No way, Gin. Absolutely no way. Don't blame yourself, sis. It wasn't your fault. It's his... You Know Who's. I mean, the bastard!" Ron spat. "How dare he do that to my little sister!" He glared at the diary. "When I get my hands on him... Harry, permission to rip the pages out one by one and chuck this thing in the nearest fire so I can send the bastard back to Hades where he belongs!"

"With pleasure..." Harry started to say, but found himself interrupted by Luella, who Summoned the diary back with a flick of her wand and pocketed it.

"Sorry, Ron, but I need this as evidence. I've got an expulsion to overturn. Anyway," and here she allowed herself to smile, "it won't do any good. Riddle's already on his way there. And if there's any justice in the world, he'll find himself spending his down time being possessed by a member of the Salvation Army and obliged to help little old ladies cross the road for all eternity."

They all laughed at that, even Ginny, who, reassured that Ron wasn't about to start calling for her expulsion, was almost back to normal again.

"Now there's an image," grinned Rianne. "Say, you never did tell us how you managed it. And where on earth did that phoenix come from?" She indicated Fawkes, who was perched on Deanna's shoulder, nibbling her ear and generally doing his best to irritate her. Deanna, long used to the ways of birds, was ignoring him in favour of the sword with which Harry had killed the Basilisk.

"Never mind the phoenix, where'd you get this?" Deanna asked, not taking her eyes off it for a minute. "This is a serious bit of fighting kit! Looks turn of the millennium to me," She sighed mistily. "A Golden Age in weaponcrafting. They don't make them like that any more."

"Oh god. Here we go," muttered Rianne. "She's off into weapon geek mode," She got to her feet. "Right! Come on everybody! We're going home! Lu and Harry can fill us in on the way. Ron, go and fetch Lockhart."

"No need," said Ron as Rianne started hauling the others to their feet. "Here he comes."

Sure enough, Lockhart was ambling towards them, beaming as if he hadn't a care in the world.

"Hello!" he cooed. "Is it safe in here yet?"

"Perfectly," Rianne smiled at him. "Lu and Harry got rid of the big, nasty snake, it's all clear."

"Did they?" Lockhart asked. "That's nice of them," A pause. "Who are Lu and Harry exactly?"

"How rude of me!" Rianne led him over to where Luella and Harry were watching Lockhart with a fascination verging on morbidity. "This young lady is Luella, and the young man with her is Harry. Lu, Harry, this is Gilderoy Lockhart, or Martha, as he's now decided to be called."

"Martha?" Luella and Harry stared incredulously at her, before looking at each other and sniggering. Finally, Luella composed herself enough to ask the inevitable question.

"Why Martha?"

"Oh well, you know," Lockhart indicated with a flourish, "Rianne here told me my name was Gilderoy, but it's such an over the top sort of name, I decided it didn't really suit me."

"You don't say?" murmured Harry under his breath. Luella said nothing, just giving Rianne a look that said 'Is he for real?' Rianne nodded, as if to say 'Not my idea!'

"So I chose Martha," Lockhart continued, oblivious to the looks the others were giving him. "Nice, simple, homespun name. Much better, I think. Don't you?"

"Oh yes. Yes of course," said Luella. "But, er, forgive me for saying this but... isn't Martha a girl's name?"

"It is?" Lockhart's face fell. He looked down at himself. "Oh darn. And I so liked the name too," He looked up, suddenly thoughtful. "Rianne, my dear, is there a way I could, you know, become a woman? I mean, I'm not really one for the usual lad pursuits, never been one for Quidditch or beer or anything like that. And shopping and dresses and make-up sound like such fun! Could I? Could I give it a try? Please?"

Rianne gave the matter some thought. "Well, there's an operation you could have, but it's not reversible. Otherwise I could look into Sex Change Potions, I know they exist.

But for now, why don't you just dress as a woman and call yourself Martha? See how you like it before committing yourself."

Lockhart clapped his hands with delight. "That would mean the world to me! Would you help me? Help me pick some clothes, show me what I need to do?"

Rianne patted his arm comfortingly. "Of course I will," She turned back to Harry and Luella, practically glowing. "Isn't he just the cutest? Know what? I hope they don't restore his memory, because I'm really rather fond of him like this."

They both had to agree. Transvestite Lockhart was better than Arrogant and Overbearing Lockhart any day.

"Martha?" Harry whispered to Luella as they began to follow the others out.

"Hey, if it makes him happy," Luella shrugged. She came to a halt. "Hang on, Harry. There's just one last thing I want to do," Leaving the others, she turned and walked over to where the dead Basilisk was lying, no longer a thing of fear, or even of hate. Instead, it just looked rather pathetic. Harry followed Luella as she knelt down by its side, stroking the giant head as if it were a beloved pet.

"Poor thing," sighed Luella. "Never had a chance really, did it? Destined to live a prisoner here in the Chamber, never getting out unless someone wanted it to kill for them, and eventually dying impaled on someone else's sword. You know, it's as much a victim as Ginny was, in a way."

Harry could only shake his head in wonder. He never could figure out how Luella could feel sorry for the strangest of people, or indeed, monsters.

"Lu, it's evil to the core. You never heard it talk. It liked killing."

"I know," Luella said, sadness there for all to see. "But it couldn't help its nature. And it's not its fault that it got stuck here in a school full of people rather than somewhere out in a remote jungle where it could hunt to its heart's content," She turned to look at Harry, this strange, bittersweet smile on her face. "See, this is why you're needed. I could never have killed it, you know. I'm too compassionate sometimes. Not ruthless enough when it counts," She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thank you."

"Hey," Harry told her. "Don't be like that. For what its worth, I rather like you being compassionate. It's rather... sweet," He suddenly realised what he'd said, and immediately started blushing. "But that's probably a deadly insult to a Slytherin, so I'll shut up now."

"Good move," Luella replied as she got to her feet. "It is the worst thing you can call a Slytherin," She hesitated, before smiling. "But just this once, I won't mind."

Harry smiled back. He couldn't help it. It was infectious like that. This must be what Fred and George jokingly referred to as a "moment". Except now, he could suddenly see the serious side to it. This must be what happiness was, pure, unsullied joy.

Which was promptly broken by Deanna calling them over.

"When you two lovebirds have finished trying to read your future in the snake entrails, can we please get a move on? We haven't got all night!"

"Thought it was goose entrails?" Ron asked.

"Yeah, but they're Parselmouths, it's probably different for them. Well? You two coming or what?"

"Yeah, alright," yawned Harry, suddenly aware of how tired he was. "Coming, Lu?"

Luella gave the Basilisk one last sorrowful glance. "I'm sorry," she whispered to it, before turning and taking Harry by the hand. "Let's go."

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Chapter Twenty Nine The Tying Up of Loose Ends

The journey back to the school was fairly uneventful. Fawkes was able to carry them back up the pipe to Moaning Myrtle's bathroom, and a few words from Luella closed up the entrance to the Chamber, hiding it away as if it had never been.

Rianne volunteered to take Lockhart to the hospital wing.

"After all," she said, "he's going to be of no use whatsoever to the debriefing, so we might as well get him out of the way."

The others unanimously agreed. After all, there were still teachers wandering around school on patrol, and there was no one better at being able to talk her way out of a sticky situation than Rianne. And so, with Rianne and Lockhart heading off in one direction, Luella, Deanna, Harry, Ron and Ginny took off in the other, following Fawkes as he led them through the dungeons towards Snape's office.

The door proved to be ajar as they approached it. Inside, they could see the fire on, and Professor Snape pouring cups of tea. Seated next to the fire were Ron and Ginny's parents. Mrs. Weasley had her head in her hands, sobbing. Mr. Weasley wasn't crying, but he seemed no less distraught. He was clutching on to Snape's sleeve with an almost plaintive sound to his voice.

"I must say, Professor, from what my sons have said about you, I always thought you were the cold and unsympathetic type, but you've been amazing throughout all this, an absolute rock..."

"I do try, Mr. Weasley. Your daughter was one of my brightest and best students, very popular, a credit to her house. It's deeply affected all of us, myself included. We will all miss her."

"My poor baby!" sobbed Mrs. Weasley. "My little girl! How could anyone do such a thing to her? My poor, poor child!"

Ginny, on hearing all this, couldn't stand it any more. Breaking loose from Ron, she raced into the office.

"It's alright, Mum, here I am!" she shouted. "I'm OK!"

Mrs. Weasley looked up, hardly daring to believe her ears. But it was true enough. Ginny really was there, in one piece, healthy and alive.

"*Ginny!*" she cried, sweeping her daughter up in her arms. Mr. Weasley soon joined her and all three of them engaged in a group hug.

Snape, by contrast, didn't bat an eyelid. He merely lowered the antique silver teapot and turned to look at the other children now pouring into the room. He looked them all up and down in wonder, taking in the slime, dirt, dust, grime, snake blood and various other substances best not mentioned covering them all liberally.

"I'm almost afraid to ask, but... what have you been doing?" He noticed Luella standing there. "Miss Martin, shouldn't you be at home? I don't want your parents up here as well."

"It's alright, Severus," The children all turned to stare as Albus Dumbledore stepped into view, a broad smile on his face. Fawkes immediately flew over to him, singing for joy. "I told Caitlin where she was. She wasn't particularly pleased, but she did go and make up an excuse to keep the Martins from worrying."

"I'm not surprised Caitlin was upset," Snape remarked. "You encouraged Luella to come up here and expose herself to mortal danger? You do take some risks sometimes, Albus."

"True enough," chuckled Dumbledore. "But in this case, I think it was one that needed to be taken." He turned to face the astonished children. "So how did you do it then? Taking on a full grown Basilisk and Lord Voldemort is no mean feat, even for five talented youngsters such as yourselves."

"You-Know-Who?" gasped Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Mrs. Weasley clutched on to Ginny even tighter.

"But... how could it have been him?" Mr. Weasley asked, incredulous. "He's hiding out in Albania, isn't he? Completely powerless and unable to influence anything, that's what you and Melissa told me."

"That, Arthur, is a very interesting question," said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling. "Does anyone here have any answers?"

Luella turned to her friends for advice. All of them were looking at her as if to say 'go on'. Looking away, her eyes fell on Ginny. The girl was looking back at her, wide-eyed and frightened, but also with a sense of resignation. Luella felt sorry for her, but

there was no help for it. They'd have to know sooner or later what Ginny had done, and better it happened now.

Turning back to Dumbledore, she produced the diary. "It was this, sir," She passed it over to him. "It's Voldemort's old school diary. Someone found it and didn't know what it was, started writing in it and got taken over by it. Voldemort used them to carry out the attacks for him."

Dumbledore flicked through the diary. "Most ingenious. Of course, Riddle always was a most talented student. Such a waste, that he had to turn to the Dark Arts," he sighed. "He could have been such a powerful force for good." He laid the diary down. "So which student was it? Did you find them?"

Luella glanced over at Ginny. Seeing that the game was up, Ginny finally gathered her courage and confessed.

"Please sir. It was me," she whispered. "I found it in with my school books when we got back from Diagon Alley. I didn't know it was You-Know-Who's or I'd never have touched it! I started writing in it, and it wrote back, and I thought it was my friend at first, but it wasn't, and by the time I realised it, it was too late..." Ginny faltered, withering under the looks her parents were giving her.

"Ginny!" gasped Mrs. Weasley, releasing her daughter at once and staring at her in horror. "How could you? What were you thinking of?"

"I'm sorry, Mum!" Ginny pleaded. "I didn't know! Didn't know what was happening to me! Didn't realise it was the diary until it was too late!"

"Ginny, what have we always told you?" sighed Mr. Weasley in exasperation. "Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain! Why didn't you show it to us sooner? It's clearly full of Dark magic!"

"I didn't think!" Ginny cried. "It was in one of my textbooks, I thought someone had just left it in there, I thought it was OK! And when I found out it wasn't, I was too scared to tell anyone. It told me that if I went to a teacher or you, that no one would believe me, or that it'd hurt Ron..." Ginny stopped talking, not trusting herself not to cry again.

She needn't have worried. Mrs. Weasley, on hearing that it had threatened Ron too, immediately forgave Ginny and swept her into a hug. "My poor child," she whispered. "My poor, dear child." Ginny peered out at Dumbledore, still trembling with fright. "I'm not expelled, am I?" she whispered.

Dumbledore gazed back tenderly. "No, of course not. There will be no punishment. Wiser witches and wizards than you have been tricked by Lord Voldemort," This was said with a sidelong glance at Snape, who averted his eyes and gazed into the fire. Dumbledore looked away again, this time looking at Luella. "However, Miss Weasley's confession does have one consequence. It means that you, Miss Martin, are completely in the clear."

These words were met with general cheering and rejoicing from the children, as Luella found herself being mobbed by Deanna and Harry, with even Ron cheering and patting her on the shoulder.

"Of course," said Dumbledore as the general hubbub died down, "Miss Weasley will have to give a formal statement to the governors. However, we don't envisage them calling for any punishment themselves, not if Professor Snape and myself speak in her favour. Certainly not at present. When they heard that she'd been captured, they all, with one noted exception, begged me to return. So here I am."

"All's well that ends well, then," Snape remarked. "Miss Weasley's safe, Miss Martin's reinstated pending the formalities, and the attacks have been halted for good. Just one thing remains," Here he gave Luella a rather curious smile. "You never did tell us how you managed it all."

"Yes, there's a mystery," Dumbledore observed. "How did you succeed where your elders did not?" He waved his wand and conjured chairs for them all, indicating for them to sit down. They all did so and, starting from the very beginning of the year, revealed the entire story to an amazed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, a very impressed Professor Snape and a not altogether surprised Dumbledore, although even he looked horrified when Harry told them how he'd been bitten by the Basilisk but survived thanks to Fawkes's tears.

Finally, the tale came to an end, with Luella explaining how she'd been able to come back from Avada Kedavra and use Riddle's own spell against him, this last feat being met with astonishment from all sides.

"You were hit by Avada Kedavra... and survived?" whispered Snape, stunned. "But how?"

"I don't know," Luella admitted. "But I think it has something to do with this." She removed Marlie's necklace and handed it over to him.

Snape examined carefully, holding it up to the light. "Miss Lovegood's necklace," he murmured. "I remember. She obtained it from her own brush with death four years ago. I always wondered if there was more to it than meets the eye," He passed it to Dumbledore. "What do you think, Albus?"

Dumbledore took it with a smile. "I always knew it would prove its worth. I said at the time it would prove a powerful protective talisman, did I not, Miss Tyler?"

Deanna nodded. "You did indeed. Told me I should make sure Marlie looked after it. Didn't know it could block the Killing Curse though!"

"It didn't block it," Luella interrupted. "It stored it and sent it back. Apparently Marlie's shadow side inhabits it - she told me it worked on the principle of inoculation."

At these words, Dumbledore suddenly nodded in recognition. "Ah, of course! I think I see. Miss Tyler, kindly reacquaint us with the closing events of Miss Lovegood's coma."

Deanna cast her memory back four years. "Well, I won't go into any great detail here, but basically, it was a struggle between Marlie and her dark twin for control of her soul, and the final battle took place in this underground cavern that must have been the Chamber of Secrets. Her dark twin, Morticia, called up Lord Voldemort to fight us both, and he summoned this Basilisk. It got me, but Marlie avoided it. Then Voldemort double-crossed Morticia by sending it after her. Marlie saved her from it, and the two of them decided to join forces. Together, they banished him from her mind, and Marlie woke up, holding this Golden Snitch in her hand, which later got made into that necklace."

Dumbledore smiled, as if his theory had just been confirmed. "So in other words, after uniting her whole mind against Voldemort and banishing him utterly, she was rewarded with this necklace. Is it apparent yet what its power is?"

They all thought hard. Luella thought back to her own meeting with Morticia. It worked on the principle of vaccination, she had said. Could she have meant...?

"Is it immune to Lord Voldemort?" she asked, hoping that didn't sound as stupid to Dumbledore as it did to her.

To her surprise, Dumbledore's smile widened and he clapped his hands.

"That's it exactly!" he laughed. "Marlene Lovegood turned down Voldemort, truly turned him down with literally all her heart and soul. That is rare indeed, for in most people there is always a dark side that can be easily manipulated. Of course, there are those who learn the hard way, but rarely is it done so young and with so little pain and heartache. At age twelve, Marlene Lovegood was tempted, almost gave in... and yet successfully resisted. As a result, he can never influence her again. And while wearing that necklace, none of his magic will work against her. Which is what saved you, Miss Martin."

"Really?" Luella stared at the necklace again, deceptively innocent-appearing as it dangled from Dumbledore's fingers. "Wow."

"You mean that necklace is an Anti-You-Know-Who Talisman," Ron whispered.
"Cool! Hey, Harry, maybe you'd better have it. You're the one he's always after."

"When all's said and done," Deanna interrupted, "it happens to be Marlie's. You want one, you knock back some Sleeping Death and get your own."

Ron frowned, something else occurring to him. "There's one thing I don't get though. If it guards against You-Know-Who, how come Marlie got Petrified?"

"Because it wasn't him, was it?" Deanna snapped. "It was his Basilisk. Only guards against something Voldie does, not his pets and minions."

"Yes," Ron persisted, "but he was commanding the Basilisk, wasn't he? If he's using magic to control someone, logically speaking, their actions won't affect the necklace wearer either, will they?"

"He wasn't using magic," said Luella firmly. "He was using Parseltongue. It allows you to talk to snakes, but they won't necessarily obey you. Will they, Harry?"

"It's true," Harry confirmed. "That snake at the Duelling Club only backed down because I shouted and because it didn't fancy its chances in a fight. A Basilisk doesn't have to obey unless it wants to, and when I heard it talking, it seemed quite keen on the idea of killing people. I think it acted of its own free will in helping Riddle."

"Suppose so," said Ron thoughtfully. "Obviously that necklace isn't perfect. But it's still a useful thing to have around."

"Indeed," remarked Snape. "And while we are on the subject of Miss Lovegood, the Restorative Draught is virtually ready. We'll have her back in person tomorrow."

This was met with yet more cheering, as Harry and Ron had realised that this meant Hermione too would be with them again.

"Wait until Hermione hears about all this!" yelled Ron. "She'll be chuffed to bits that she was right about the Basilisk," His face fell just as quickly. "Oh gods, Harry, she'll be unbearable."

"You'll be glad to have her back really," Harry told him.

"Yeah... suppose," sighed Ron.

"Yay, Marlie's coming back!" enthused Deanna. "She's going to be so relieved it's all over, especially when she hears her necklace saved Lu's life. Although she'll be rather upset at having missed all the action."

"Knowing Marlie, she won't mind that," Luella commented. "She got to face down Riddle and the Basilisk and survived, and her necklace saved the day. That'll be enough for her," She started to smile. "Especially when she finds out that joining us would have ruined her outfit." Everyone laughed at that. It was true, Marlie would have never recovered from the trauma.

Happiest of all was Ginny. "It's over, it's over!" she whispered ecstatically. "Everything's going to be OK! It's over!" She looked like she was going to collapse with relief.

"Yes, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley soothed her. "It's all over. Everything's going to be just fine," She looked up, a thought occurring to her. "Albus, if Ginny's been under the influence of this diary since August, that would mean this Tom Riddle was already affecting her when she was Sorted, isn't that right?"

"Quite probably, Molly, although the exact degree of influence is impossible to state," Dumbledore replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because every single member of our family, except for a few distant Hufflepuff cousins and that rather strange Squib relative of mine who ran away to become an accountant, has been Gryffindor for generations. And yet Ginny's not. Is it stretching the bounds of possibility that perhaps that was down to Riddle influencing her?"

Dumbledore and Snape exchanged glances.

"Well, Severus? What do you think? You know Slytherin better than I do."

"It's possible," shrugged Snape. "But once Sorted, you're not allowed to change Houses. The Sorting, once done, cannot be reversed."

Mrs. Weasley was not to be put off. "Yes, but what if the Sorting was flawed? That is, what if it's not a true reflection of her personality? I mean, if she was under the influence of a noted Slytherin, and we are all agreed that she could well have been, doesn't that skew the result? What if she's really a Gryffindor deep down?" There was an almost fanatical fervour to Mrs. Weasley, as if she were desperate to have Ginny back in the family fold in every way. Luella began to realise who Ron took after.

However, there was more than a hint of Weasley stubbornness in Ginny too.

"But Mum, I can't change Houses!" Ginny gasped, aghast at the prospect. "All my friends are in Slytherin! I like being there! If I change Houses, they'll never speak to me again!"

Mrs. Weasley held her ground. "Ginny, love, you might have felt at home there before, but now you're not enchanted, you're not the same person, are you? It won't be long before you start wishing you were back with your brothers again."

"I don't want to be with my brothers!" Ginny fumed. "I want to be with Lydia, and Autumn, and Marlie, and Deanna, and Rianne, and Lu! I want to spend my evenings playing Jenga, and listening to Muggle pop tunes on the stereo! Marlie's working on a TV and video over the summer, we could have films and TV programmes before long! I don't want to get stuck in Gryffindor!"

"Ginny!" snapped Mrs. Weasley. "Stop sulking! There is nothing wrong with Gryffindor House, and if that's your true House then there you will go!"

"It's not my true House!" Ginny yelled, by now stamping her feet in full adolescent stroppiness. "I want to stay in Slytherin!"

Mrs. Weasley looked horrified. "Ginny, you surely don't want to be in, well, that house after all that's happened this year, do you?"

"Yes!" Ginny stormed.

Mrs. Weasley looked as if she were about to faint. Giving up on her daughter, she appealed to her husband. "Arthur, do something!"

Mr. Weasley started fidgeting nervously, caught between wanting to please his daughter and yet avoid getting into an argument with his wife. "Ah, er, um, Ginny dear, if that's where you'd be best suited, then maybe you should transfer to Gryffindor..." He noticed the way his daughter was glaring at him, and decided that now was a good time to pass the buck. "But maybe we should ask your teachers what they think," He turned hopefully to Professor Snape. "What do you think, Professor?"

"I must say, Ginny's settled into Slytherin very well," Snape remarked. "It would be a shame to disrupt her schooling now, after a whole year. What do you say, Albus?"

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully. "A student transferring from one House to another isn't common, I grant you, but it's not unheard of. However, I think that what would be best is for us to consider Ginny's true personality and to which House she is most suited. And there is only one person who can give us an unbiased opinion in that respect. Harry?"

Harry looked up, startled. "What?" he stammered. "I don't have to choose, do I?" He found himself faced with the horrible vision of never being allowed within sight of the Weasley house ever again.

"No, of course not," Dumbledore smiled. "All I need from you is the Sorting Hat which you're still clutching on to."

"Oh!" Harry felt himself going red. "Here you go, sir," He handed the Hat back to Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Harry," Dumbledore took the hat from him. "Now, Miss Weasley, if you'd like to come here and take a seat?" He conjured a chair for her, and indicated for her to sit down before turning to her parents. "Now, Molly. What I propose is for Ginny to try on the Hat again, now that Riddle is truly gone and she is herself once more. What the Hat sees in her will be her true personality, unclouded by any form of enchantment, and thus, lead to her being assigned to her true House. Is this agreeable to you?"

Mrs. Weasley nodded. "I think it's a wonderful idea."

"Very good. And will you agree to abide by the Hat's decision, even if it is not what you yourself would have chosen?"

Mrs. Weasley closed her eyes, seemingly in pain. An eternity seemed to pass by. Everyone held their breath in anticipation. Would she agree?

Finally she opened her eyes again. "Very well," she sighed. "If it's where she'd be happiest. At least she's alive and well, and if she does get sorted into Slytherin again, at least nothing will have changed."

"Thank you, Molly," Dumbledore turned to Ginny. "What about you, Miss Weasley? Will you abide by the Hat's decision even if you don't like it?"

Ginny nodded. "If it gets Mum off my back."

Dumbledore laughed. "How very pragmatic of you. Maybe you won't have to worry after all. But now. Let us Sort you properly," Lifting the Hat, he held it above Ginny's head before slowly lowering it onto her as if she were a queen being crowned. Ginny looked pensive, but she was clutching her chair with a fierce determination that whatever happened, she would not allow herself to be frightened by it. And so Dumbledore released the Hat, and she disappeared under it.

Once more, it shut out the outside world as firmly as a brick wall. Ginny felt her tension melt away as the now familiar womblike interior of the Hat blocked out her senses, leaving her in her own little world. Alone... except for the voice of the Hat.

"*Well, well, well, if it isn't Ginny Weasley again. What can I do for you then?*"

I need re-Sorting, she told it.

"*What???*" The Hat seemed outraged that its professional judgement was being called into question. "*What's wrong, was I not good enough last time? I'm not changing your House now, just because you don't like it.*"

I do like it, I really do, Ginny hastily reassured it. *But you see, I was kind of possessed by this evil Slytherin at my first Sorting, and my mum thinks it might have had an effect on things. Can you tell me where I'm really meant to be?*

The Hat still seemed rather put out. "*This is most unorthodox.*"

I know, I know, but she's really getting me down. Can you just reSort me once and for all? It was Dumbledore's idea, not mine.

"*Oh very well. Sit tight and I'll have a look inside.*"

Ginny waited while the Hat had a look at her. She could almost feel it poking around inside, looking around her mind. Eventually, it spoke to her again.

To be honest with you, Miss Weasley, there's not a lot of difference, except you seem rather more world-weary this time around. So I suppose the burning question is, what do you want?"

What do I want? Ginny wondered. A very good question. She wasn't sure herself. But there was one thing she did know.

I want to be myself, she thought. *I don't want to be a carbon copy of my mum. I don't want to tag along after my brothers. I want to be me. Ginny Weasley.*

"*Your mother was a Gryffindor.*"

Yes.

"*She wants that for you too?*"

Ginny paused. Then...

Yes.

"But you're not so sure."

Oh, I'm sure alright. Sure that I don't want her telling me what to do! seethed Ginny. It's my life that's going to be hugely disrupted if I have to change to Gryffindor or anywhere else, not hers! She's just upset that we're not all one big, happy, picture-perfect, identical family and she doesn't care how upset I'll be if I have to pretend to be like all the others!

"You want to stay in Slytherin."

Yes! thought Ginny, a lump in her throat. My friends are there, I'm happy there! This year in Slytherin's been great, well, when I wasn't being possessed by a haunted and demonic diary anyway. I don't want to leave!

"Looks like you already know where you really belong, doesn't it?"

Ginny nodded, a tear in her eye.

Yes. Yes, I do.

"Then far be it for me to prevent you from being happy. Your true calling is SLYTHERIN!"

Ginny whipped the Hat off and squealed with delight. Deanna and Luella leapt to their feet and rushed towards her, flinging their arms round her and jumping up and down, yelling and screaming.

"A win, a win, for Slytherin!" chanted Deanna. She gave Ginny a pat on the shoulder before proclaiming to the entire room, "Our doing, this! Me and Rianne, we taught her everything she knows about being Slyth!"

Luella glanced at Mrs. Weasley, who looked rather less pleased. She reached out to caution her friend.

"I wouldn't say stuff like that if I were you, Deanna. Mrs. Weasley looks like she's about to kill you."

Deanna looked over at Ginny's mother.

"She looks more sad than angry."

It was true. Mrs. Weasley was shooting a few annoyed glances at Deanna, but when her eyes fell on Ginny, all that was in them was sadness, pure and simple.

Ginny had noticed it too. Leaving Deanna and Luella, she went over to her mother.

"I'm sorry, Mum," she said quietly, for the second time that evening. However, this time, she didn't sound like a frightened child begging for forgiveness. This time, the

tone of her voice indicated that while she was sorry her mother was upset, she wasn't sorry for what had caused it.

"If it's where you'll be happy," said Mrs. Weasley woodenly, before wiping away a tear and pulling Ginny into her arms. "Oh, Ginny," she wept. "My precious, precious Ginny! I so hoped you'd follow in our footsteps, but if it's not to be..." She let her daughter go and tried to smile. "Just... be good, alright? I don't want you getting mixed up in anything untoward or illegal, understand?"

"Too late," muttered Deanna. Mrs. Weasley paused, remembering recent events.

"Well, not again, anyway," she added.

"I can't be any worse than Fred and George," Ginny grinned. Mrs. Weasley shuddered.

"I should hope not!" she exclaimed, before smiling. "At least you're alive and well. That's the main thing. When I think of all we've been through tonight..." She brushed the thought out of her mind. "It doesn't matter. It's behind us now. You're alive. That's all that matters."

"Thanks, Mum," Ginny whispered, profoundly relieved that there wasn't going to be yet another family rift. She turned to her father. "Dad?"

Mr. Weasley just smiled. "Ginny, do you really think I mind what house you're in? The Malfoys and their friends might be a bad lot, but I know from personal experience that there's plenty of, erm, more benevolent Slytherins out there. Like Melissa, or Snape here, or the Tylers, or Miss Martin, who by the way, I don't believe I've actually thanked for saving your life yet. Excuse me for one minute, Ginny." He walked over to where Harry and Luella were sitting and bowed very formally. "Harry, Miss Martin..."

"Luella. Please," Luella said, feeling rather uncomfortable about all this.

"Very well. Luella, Harry. I'd just like to say thank you to both of you for saving my daughter, that it was a very brave thing to do, and if there's ever anything I can do to repay you both..." Mr. Weasley choked on his words, just about managing to hold back the tears, but only just. Instead, he grabbed hold of Harry's hand and pumped it up and down furiously, before letting him go and sweeping Luella into a hug that nearly crushed the life out of her.

"Quite alright, Mr. Weasley!" Luella gasped, extricating herself. "It's what I'm here for after all." She reached out and smoothed her hair and clothes down. And it was then that her cloak slipped away from her right arm, revealing her Mark to the sharp-eyed gaze of Mrs. Weasley.

"What is that on your arm?" she gasped, pointing at the symbol. Luella hastily tried to cover it up, but it was too late. Mrs. Weasley had seen it and was not to be put off. Getting up, she stepped forward and swept the cloak back.

"A tattoo?" She gave Luella a very hard stare. "Exactly what sort of family do you come from?"

Luella stared desperately at Snape and Dumbledore. She'd deliberately left the part about her being the Second Heir of Slytherin out of the story she'd told the Weasleys earlier, guessing that they probably wouldn't understand and it would only either confuse or antagonise them. "Help me," she whispered.

"Don't worry, Luella," Dumbledore stepped in. "I'll explain everything. Molly, you asked what sort of family she came from. I shall tell you. Her immediate family are very respectable Muggles. But her mother's distant forbears are members of a very honourable lineage indeed, one that goes back to the Founding and beyond. The same family as Deanna's, in fact."

Both Weasleys looked rather puzzled at this. "But... how can that be?" asked Mr. Weasley. "The Tylers only emerged in the eighteenth century, they started out as Welsh Muggle-borns."

"Unless you mean the Yorkshire Tylers," added Mrs. Weasley, "who emigrated from New England not long after the Welsh Tylers established themselves. But they were Muggle-borns too."

A hollow laugh came from Snape. "Don't believe everything you hear," he sneered. "Of course we said we were Muggle-borns - the Ministry would have wiped us out if they'd known who we really were. My ancestors came back for a reason - our Welsh cousins had told us it was safe again."

"You're a Yorkshire Tyler?" asked Mr. Weasley, now completely bewildered.

"My mother was," Snape told him.

"But if you weren't Muggle-borns really, who were you?" Mrs. Weasley demanded. "Why did you need to hide your identities?"

"Persecution. War. The usual," Snape said casually. "We were at war with another prominent family. They had fingers in as much of the Muggle elite as they could get their hands into - the landed aristocracy, the Church, everywhere. Their ancestors were Muggle aristocrats, and they'd never lost the taste for it. They believed they were born to rule, and that God had given them magic to do just that. Of course, the magic resulted from a dynastic marriage many years before, but they chose to ignore that unless it suited them. They spent most of their time manipulating and exploiting Muggle society in order to enrich themselves and ensure that they were more powerful than various other less 'contaminated' families who might otherwise have despised them for their Muggle connections. And of course, to deal with their equally powerful rivals that wanted revenge," Here, Snape gave a twisted little smile. "My family."

"And then what?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Did they defeat you?"

Snape nodded. "They did. For a time. See, many among us were known for our healing ability and our hatred of tyranny, especially when women and children bore the brunt of it, and we worked as midwives, healers, political agitators, doing what we could to help the ordinary folk of Great Britain do what they could to get by. It helped that we were a Welsh family at a time when the English establishment was at its most ruthless. And in the end, things came to a head. We scored a magnificent coup in getting rid of the Catholic church as an official force when we assisted a young Muggle princess of Welsh extraction to secure the throne from her sister, which severely dented our enemies' power. And they were quick to take revenge. Once our patron monarch was dead, forty-five glorious years later, they swung into action, setting up a new dynasty with a king who hated women and witchcraft above all. Where our queen had discouraged religious extremism of all kinds, this king sided with the worst of the Protestants, who by this time, our enemies had infiltrated. He was not slow in declaring witch hunts, and our enemies took advantage of the situation and accused us of dark magic. The Ministry got involved, and between the Aurors and the Inquisition, our days were numbered," Snape stared bitterly into the fire. "We lost everything. Most of our money. Our power. Any influence over either the Muggle or mage establishment. Our chief strongholds at Glastonbury and Tintagel. They drove us back right into the very depths of Wales, until our clan mother finally gathered the remnants into our last bastion in Pembrokeshire. And here we were finally safe. The Muggles here were having none of the witchcraze, and refused to be of any assistance whatsoever, while there were no mages around to help the Ministry. Unable to find us, they gave in. And so some of our number remained there, the dominant ones among us. However, also at that time, the first colonies in America were being set up. And so some emigrated, fleeing over the sea to a land where the Ministry would never find them. They left the colonies, befriended local people, teamed up with various other fugitive mages and travelled north to present day Massachusetts, where they founded the all-mage town of Arkham, so named because they regarded it as their Ark, their sanctuary until the floodwaters went down. And that is how things stayed until the political climate changed. Until the Enlightenment freed the Muggles from believing in such superstitions and fatally undermined the Puritans and clergy, the Industrial Revolution savaged our enemies wealth, and the (A/N: *English, not American!*) Civil War took their land, most of it anyway. The Ministry responded to all these changes by withdrawing entirely from the Muggle world, and banning adult mages from having any contact with it unless absolutely necessary. And so we could finally return and regroup. We still had quite a bit of wealth piled up, and although we never achieved our former power, we were more than capable of re-establishing ourselves. However, there was one thing we could never regain. And that was our good name. Our true name was lost to us, defamed and blackened by our enemies, associated with the worst kind of evil. And so we had to take another one, pretending to be Muggle-borns. My branch of the family had it worst - we couldn't even claim to be British Muggle-borns. We had to put up with all the condescension of the English at their worst. And so, even though we were free again, we never were able to fully heal the wounds. And so it endured until this very day. Our one consolation was that our enemies had also dwindled in numbers and power. But it didn't help us." Snape fell silent, gazing into the fire again.

Mrs. Weasley broke the silence. "But who were they?" she asked. "I mean... your family, that is. And your enemies, who were they? Are they still around? Are they as dangerous as you make out?"

"Oh yes," Snape nodded. "I strongly suspect they caused your daughter's troubles this year. They're the Malfoy family."

"The Malfoys!" exclaimed Mr. and Mrs. Weasley.

"The Malfoys?" Ron whispered to Harry. "But if that's so... why is Draco his favourite student?"

Harry just shrugged. "Maybe it's all part of some devious conspiracy to stab them in the back by subverting their son. Who knows?"

Mrs. Weasley had turned to Ginny, grasping her shoulders and looking her straight in the eye.

"Ginny, are you sure you still want to stay in Slytherin?"

"Mum!" snapped Ginny.

"Alright, alright, dear, I was just asking," said Mrs. Weasley, backing off.

Deanna tugged Mrs. Weasley's sleeve.

"Mrs. Weasley, I can guarantee that Draco will not try anything with Ginny. If he does, I will personally make him wish he'd been born a Muggle."

Mrs. Weasley did not look convinced. "But he managed to give Ginny the diary last time..."

"No he didn't," Ginny countered. "He had no idea what it was."

"It's true," Harry spoke up. "When Draco first saw the diary, he didn't show any signs of recognising it. In fact, he tried to take it off me. Didn't work though."

"He did take it off me," said Ginny softly. "Not long after I stole it back. He wanted to see what it was, so I let him. He saw it was blank, wanted to give it back, but I told him I didn't want it. So he kept hold of it. Right up until last week," Ginny shivered at the memory. "He gave it back the morning Marlie was attacked. Said he felt bad about taking it," She laughed miserably. "You know, he was actually trying to be nice to me? Look where it got us all."

"Either that or his dad had told him what it was in the mean time and told him to get it back to you ASAP," Ron sneered.

"He didn't," sighed Deanna. "The day before he'd apologised to me for getting Luella expelled. He really was trying to redeem himself."

"He got Luella expelled, did he?" said Mr. Weasley grimly. "Why am I not surprised? Nothing that family does surprises me any more. How'd he manage that then?"

The room fell silent. Ron became aware of Harry, Luella and Snape looking at him knowingly, with varying degrees of disapproval. Steeling himself for the inevitable row, he opened his mouth to confess.

"Please, Dad, it was..."

"All down to Malfoy and his friends eavesdropping," Deanna interrupted, shooting Ron a glance that told him to shut up or else. "They found out certain stuff about Lu which they shouldn't have done, twisted it to make it look like she was guilty and told Malfoy's dad. That's how." Ron stared at Deanna.

"What?" he whispered. "But you know it was..."

"Your fault?" Deanna whispered back. "Yeah, I know. But there's not really anything to gain by you getting in trouble too, is there?"

"Thanks," Ron whispered, suddenly grateful. "I don't deserve it, you know."

"I know that," Deanna muttered. "But look at it this way. You hate Malfoy. I hate Malfoy. Let's bury the hatchet and work together in future, shall we?"

"Alright," Ron grinned. "Cheers!" They shook hands.

"Anything to do with that tattoo, by any chance?" Mrs. Weasley's voice cut across the room. "You still haven't told us what that's for."

"That, my dear," said Snape, finally raising his eyes, "leads us back to the identity of my forebears. It's a name you've certainly heard. We," Snape got his feet with a flourish, "were the hated and feared Tal-y-Rhys."

"What?" gasped Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Mr. Weasley put an arm around his wife, who had gone pale.

"Not the child-murderers?" she gasped.

"The main abortion providers in Wales and the South West," Snape corrected her.

"Child-stealers?" Mrs. Weasley offered.

"And the only adoption agency."

"Abductors of young people up and down the country?"

"We only took those who wanted to come. Namely, those escaping marriages that had become a prison or marriages they were going to be forced in to, those escaping abusive families, or who had nowhere else to go."

"Inventors of the Avada Kedavra curse?"

"Originally invented by our healers as a means of swiftly and painlessly ending the misery of those who we couldn't save, and also used as a means of evading capture or torture, or bringing a quick death to captured mages and Muggles undergoing torture or burning at the stake."

Mrs. Weasley tilted her head to one side, watching him rather thoughtfully. "I daresay the trafficking with demons isn't true either, is it?"

Snape merely bowed his head. "While certain of us certainly were engaged in demonology, I can honestly say it was not a widespread practice. Nor was it limited to the Tal-y-Rhys."

Mrs. Weasley digested all this. "So none of the tales told about them are true then?"
"No."

"Just lies and distortions of the truth put about by the Malfoys?"

"Yes."

Mrs. Weasley looked sharply at him before turning to Dumbledore. "Is all this true?"

"Oh yes," said Dumbledore amiably. "Every word."

"And Luella and Deanna are both descended from them."

"I'm not descended from them," Deanna spoke up indignantly. "I am one!"

"I see," said Mrs. Weasley. "And do you all have those tattoos?"

Deanna shook her head. "No. Just Lu."

"Just Luella?" Mrs. Weasley began to look really confused at this, sitting down again.
"Why is that?"

"That, Mrs. Weasley, brings us back to our tale of how the Tal-y-Rhys lost their power," said Snape. "But it also brings us back to how our feud with the Malfoys originated. And it started with the usual family wrangling." And Snape proceeded to explain to them all how Rowena Ravenclaw had been a Tal-y-Rhys, heiress of the noted clan mother Rhiannon the White Lady, had married Salazar Slytherin and conceived from him a daughter, Morgan. How they'd founded Hogwarts together, but drifted apart as Salazar became ever more ambitious, until finally he'd divorced her out of the blue, tried to marry Morgan off to a Muggle lord, failed, married a rather more pliant Veela instead, had a daughter and married her off to the heir of the De Malfois family. The resulting line of warrior-mages had served his cause ever since, and had been bitter enemies of the Tal-y-Rhys. Salazar himself had been defeated, thanks to his former wife and elder daughter turning against him. And Morgan had prophesied that Slytherin House would remain in darkness for a thousand years, until two Heirs of Slytherin would be born to the Muggles, grow up to become powerful mages and fight each other to the death. And the Heir of Morgan would win with

Gryffindor help, and the Heir of Salazar would be defeated for good. Then the wounds would heal, the feuds end and peace return at last.

"Salazar's Heir must have been Riddle then." Mr. Weasley said thoughtfully. "And Morgan's Heir?"

"Is right here," said Deanna, indicating Luella. "Some of the Tal-y-Rhys were squibs, and we think she's descended from one of them. At any rate, she's got Morgan's Mark, has had ever since the Chamber opened."

"It's true," Luella confirmed. "You know, Ginny, maybe you did me a favour after all."

Ginny blushed and looked away. It was Mrs. Weasley who spoke up.

"So... does that mean the prophecy's done now? After all, you have defeated the other Heir. And you have healed quite a few wounds in doing so."

It was Dumbledore who answered. "Afraid not, Molly. That was only a shadow of the real Lord Voldemort. The real Heir of Salazar is still out there somewhere, gone but not destroyed. He tried to return last year, he may try to do it again. This battle is won and very decisively too. But the war still goes on. The bloodfeud still goes on."

"It's true," Deanna sighed. "Sorry, Lu. I still hate Malfoy."

"That's alright," Luella comforted her. "I still hate Malfoy too."

"So you'll be needing allies then," said Mr. Weasley.

Deanna and Snape both looked at him rather guardedly.

"Maybe," answered Deanna.

Mr. Weasley exchanged looks with his wife. Mrs. Weasley nodded.

"Do it, Arthur."

Mr. Weasley approached Snape, hand outstretched.

"Professor, it's a fairly open secret that my family and that of Lucius Malfoy have never been on the best of terms, and, well, if your lot despise them as well, it only seems natural that your family and mine join forces. What do you say, Professor?"

Snape bowed. "Mr. Weasley, I would be honoured. However, it's not me you should be approaching. Clan alliances can only be made by appealing to the Tal-y-Rhys Clan Mother."

Mr. Weasley dropped his hand, rather deflated. "Oh. Er, who might that be?"

"You already know her. Caitlin Tyler."

"Really?" Mr. Weasley practically jumped up and down with delight. "Is she really? My goodness, I had no idea. Well, I shall certainly have to have a word with her."

"Indeed," remarked Snape. "However, if you wish to swear allegiance tonight, the eldest daughter of the Clan Mother is also empowered to take oaths of loyalty."

"I am?" Deanna stared at him.

"Of course you are, girl, you're Heiress of Tal-y-Rhys. When you come of age, you'll exercise powers almost equal to those of the Lady herself, including forming provisional year and a day alliances between the Tal-y-Rhys and other clans."

"Yeah, but I'm only fourteen," Deanna responded.

Snape just smiled. "You can still form provisional alliances now. They just need to be confirmed by your mother within a month to be valid."

"Well, alright then!" However, Deanna still looked dubious. "Er... is there any set means of doing this?"

"I believe there's a proper ritual somewhere," Snape observed. "But I can't remember what it is and now is not the time to look for it. Just do your best."

"OK," sighed Deanna. "But don't blame me if this goes horribly wrong. Do you both promise to help us when we need it?"

"We do," Mr. and Mrs. Weasley promised.

"Do you promise to regard the Malfoys, Lord Voldemort and any of their allies or agents as your enemies?"

"Of course."

"Do you promise not to go running to any of the above with any family secrets?" This was said with a particularly pointed look at Ron.

"We do."

"And do you promise to provide a warm welcome and some of that very nice chocolate cake that Mrs. Weasley makes to any hungry members of Clan Tal-y-Rhys that might happen to drop by at any time?" Deanna asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

Mr. Weasley burst out laughing, while Mrs. Weasley pretended to look rather shocked. Snape just raised an eyebrow.

"I don't recall *that* being in the usual Oath of Allegiance."

"What?" Deanna protested. "You told me to wing it! Anyway," she folded her arms, marshalling all of the Tyler determination, "clan alliances generally involve providing services when a member of the family is in need, and my needs include having a

mother whose cooking ability is limited to baked beans on toast. Sometimes cheese on toast if she's feeling adventurous."

Mr. and Mrs. Weasley smiled at each other. Caitlin's lack of anything resembling domestic skills was legendary.

"Deanna, dear, feel free to come over whenever you like," Mrs. Weasley smiled.
"There's always food available, you'll be quite welcome."

"Thanks, Mrs. Weasley," Deanna smiled, before turning to Ron and Ginny. "What about you two? Allies?"

"Allies!" yelled Ginny, clasping Deanna's hand. Deanna shook hands before turning to Ron.

"Well? Allies?"

Ron hesitated before holding out his hand. "Allies." They shook on it.

"Is that everything?" Mr. Weasley asked after shaking Deanna's hand in turn.

"Pretty much. I'll tell Mum everything, and then I think she'll meet up with you and confirm it, give you a token of alliance or something, I'm a bit vague on the details."

"What about the other children?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

"No probs. We'll get them ourselves and ask them. Won't we, Lu?"

"Yeah, leave that to us. Marls can do Fred and George, and I'll get Penny to swear in Percy when she wakes up...." Luella suddenly remembered that she'd promised to keep quiet about Percy and Penny's relationship.

"Penny?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "Who's Penny?"

"Penny Clearwater," said Luella, realising that it was too late to keep quiet now.
"Patrick Clearwater's daughter, she's my cousin."

"I know the family," Mr. Weasley nodded. "But what's she got to do with our Percy?"

"They're not going out, are they?" Ginny asked, starting to grin. She saw the mortified look on Luella's face. "They are, aren't they? Oh wow, Percy's got a girlfriend!"

"Percy?" Ron looked as if he couldn't believe his ears. "Has got a girlfriend?" He stared blankly at Luella. "How?"

"Ron!" snapped Mrs. Weasley. She turned to Luella, seemingly enraptured. "Percy's got a girlfriend! How wonderful! What's she like? Is she a nice girl?"

"She's lovely," Luella promised her. "You'll like her."

Mrs. Weasley sighed with happiness. "Oh, that's just perfect! I was worried about him, but to hear he's finally found someone... Wonderful! We shall have to invite her over, won't we Arthur?"

"Er, yes, yes, whatever you say, Molly," said Mr. Weasley hastily.

"Splendid!" laughed Mrs. Weasley. She turned to her other children, who were still trying not to burst out laughing. "Now, you two will promise not to tease him, won't you?"

"Absolutely, Mum," said Ginny, a very picture of innocence.

Ron nodded. "We won't say a word," He waited until his mother had turned away before whispering to his sister, "We'll just let Fred and George get on with it."

"Sounds like a plan," giggled Ginny.

Dumbledore's voice cut across the general hubbub.

"And now," he announced, "that everything seems to have been brought to the best of conclusions, I think it's about time we all went to bed. It's getting late after all, and we've all been sitting talking for quite long enough... yes, Harry?"

Harry had his hand in the air, clearly wanting to ask just one last question.

"Sir," he began, "you know there was doubt over what house Ginny was in?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Well, there's a bit of doubt over what house I'm really part of too."

"There is?" Ron asked, confused.

"Yeah," nodded Harry. "When I was first sorted, the Hat tried... it tried..." He collected his wits. "It tried to put me in Slytherin." There it was. The secret was out. Although, now he'd actually voiced his secret fear, in the office of the Head of Slytherin, with no less than four Slytherins in the room with him, it sounded faintly ridiculous. Nevertheless, he was not to be put off. "It only put me in Gryffindor because I asked it not to be Slytherin. I didn't think anything of it again until this year. Then the whole Heir of Slytherin thing started up, I got suspected, and I can do Parseltongue too. And Riddle, well, he's a lot like me, I mean..."

"You're sneaking round the school at night attacking students?" sneered Snape derisively. "Dear me, Professor McGonagall doesn't know the half of it, does she?"

"Not like that!" Harry protested. "But we've both got the same background. We're both orphans, both Muggle-raised, both had horrible childhoods, we even look alike. Even Luella said I was more ruthless than she is."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Luella gasped. "I just said I couldn't have brought myself to kill the Basilisk, that's all!"

"I heard what you said," Harry smiled grimly. "You said you were too compassionate, unlike me," He turned back to Dumbledore. "I guess what I'm really asking is, am I really a hero? Or the next dark wizard in waiting?"

Dumbledore knelt next to him, their eyes meeting. "Do you want to be?"

"No!" cried Harry. "But... I'm scared I might end up being one without even realising it."

Dumbledore just looked at him gently. "Harry. Listen to me. Yes, there are similarities between you and Riddle. You both came from less than happy backgrounds. But that's where it ends. Yes, you've emerged with a dark side - who wouldn't, given that kind of upbringing? But Riddle is evil for one reason and one reason only - because he chose to be. Not necessarily because he was in Slytherin - you and I both know that ambition can be used for good. But he chose the path of evil. You did not. You chose the path of good."

"But I'm still a Parselmouth," Harry pointed out. "I'm still part Slytherin, if not a full one."

"Thank Apollo," muttered Snape. Dumbledore chose to ignore him.

"Harry, dear boy, listen to your friend Luella, one who's certainly qualified to speak authoritatively on all things Slytherin. She said she couldn't have killed the Basilisk, she wasn't ruthless enough. And yet it needed to be killed, or you or someone else would have surely died," Dumbledore smiled at Harry. "Slytherin pragmatism has its place, don't feel ashamed of it. It just needs balancing with other qualities, such as honour, bravery, honesty and decency. Qualities which your Gryffindor side possesses in abundance."

"I never thought of it like that," Harry admitted. "But what about the Parseltongue?"

"Oh that," said Dumbledore. "As to that, my best guess is that when Voldemort left that scar on your head as a child, he also left some of his power within you, including the ability to talk to snakes. Not your fault and certainly no indicator of future moral development."

Harry didn't look so sure. Dumbledore, seeing this, reached out and took the sword that Harry had drawn from the Hat.

"Harry. Look at this sword. Really look at it. Especially the design on the hilt."

Harry examined it carefully, soon picking out the familiar double-snake Mark of Morgan.

"The Mark," he said miserably. "Sign of the Tal-y-Rhys. I should be one of them."

"Look closer," Dumbledore urged him. "In particular at the animal head between those of the two snakes, and the name on the hilt."

"It's a lion's head," Harry said in amazement. "And..." here his eyes widened yet further, "It belongs to Godric Gryffindor!" He handed the sword to Dumbledore, unable to believe his eyes.

"Yes," smiled Dumbledore. "Godric Gryffindor's sword, forged for him by Morgan Tal-y-Rhys's best smiths." His eyes turned serious. "Only a true Gryffindor could have pulled that out of the Hat, Harry."

Deanna's eyes lit up when she heard this. "Cool!" She gave Luella a nudge. "Told you it was a serious bit of kit, didn't I?"

Harry got up, shaking, and turned to Ron. "Wow," he whispered. "I really am a Gryffindor!"

Ron just snorted. "Well, duh. Of course you are, Harry, me and Hermione could have told you in a second!" He patted his friend on the back. "Come on, you. Let's go back to the dorm. We've had a long day."

"An excellent idea, if I may say so," said Dumbledore. "Come on, let's all let Severus have his office back."

"Yes, can Severus have his office back?" snapped Snape rather testily. "It's getting late and I have a Restorative Draught to finish. If you don't mind."

"All in good time, Severus, all in good time. Arthur, Molly, do you want to spend the night in Hogwarts' guest rooms? It's a little late to be travelling back now, after all."

"Why, thank you, Albus, we'd love to," smiled Mrs. Weasley. She turned to Ginny. "Ginny, love, do you want to stay with us, or are you happy to go back to your own dorm?"

"I'll go back to my own dorm," Ginny decided. "Everyone will want to know where I am, after all."

And so the little gathering dispersed, Deanna and Luella accompanying Ginny back to the Serpents' Nest, Dumbledore showing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley to the guest suite, and Harry and Ron making for Gryffindor Tower with a note from Dumbledore in case they ran into any teachers. Leaving Snape alone. From a hidden perch in the far corner of the room, Corvus emerged from hiding and fluttered to join his wizard companion.

"Have they gone?" the raven enquired.

"Yes, thank Hades," sighed Snape, sinking back into his chair, relieved that it was all over. *"Is the potion alright?"*

"Bubbling along nicely, just like it should be. Ready in a few hours, I estimate."

"Excellent," yawned Snape. "After a day like today, the last thing I need is any more hassles."

"Is it all sorted out then?" asked the bird. "Did they rescue that young red-feathered fledgling?" "Yes, she's perfectly safe and well. In the end, everything turned out beautifully. They got the predator and his snake, and everything is back to normal."

Corvus flapped his wings in jubilation. "Ah-ha! So now it's time for one of those party things, is it?"

"For them," shrugged Snape. "All I want to do is sleep. I'll tell you this, Corvus, victory may well be sweet, but what they don't bother to tell you is that the aftermath wears you out."

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Chapter Thirty The Best Possible Outcome

Despite the late hour, the Nest was far from empty. Quite a few Slytherins, unable to face going to bed, were still up, sitting listlessly around, not sure what to do with themselves. Draco was still sitting in the wooden chair he'd been in before, Pansy perched on the arm, leaning against him for support. Lydia was curled up on a beanbag next to the fire, with Autumn just opposite, sharing a silent vigil for one they hadn't realised they could get so close to.

"Wonder if we'll ever see her again," said Autumn morosely.

Lydia shrugged. "Who knows. DT and Ri went after her, they wouldn't have done that if they didn't think there was a chance."

"Or maybe they just wanted revenge," Autumn countered.

Lydia shook her head. "Not Rianne. She wouldn't go unless there was a point to it. She'd have bided her time and waited. Deanna may not listen to many people, but Rianne is one of them." They fell silent again. There was some hope, but it was a slim one even so. For a time, they watched the fire dance in the shadowy stone hearth, desolate with a tawdry string of fibre-optics, a stark reminder of another Slytherin gone.

"It'll be quiet without her," said Autumn softly.

"Laetitia says it used to be this quiet all the time before Marlie got to work on this place," said Lydia, gazing around.

"Never this quiet," whispered Autumn. She looked at her feet. "I'll miss her."

"I'll miss her too." They fell silent, until the quiet was broken by the sound of the door opening. Everyone turned, wondering if it were Snape with yet another announcement. They couldn't believe their eyes as Deanna appeared, smiling in triumph.

"Hey kids," she grinned, leaping into the room. "We got visitors." She stepped aside to reveal Ginny, covered in cobwebs and grime but otherwise alive and well.

"Gin!" the two first years shrieked, rushing forward to greet her. "You're alive!"

Ginny held her arms open and the three of them hugged.

"It's alright!" Ginny whispered. "It's over! I'm OK!"

Lydia looked her up and down. "What happened to you?" she asked, taking in Ginny's dishevelled state.

"I got dragged through a disused water pipe to this underground chamber," Ginny explained. Both Lydia and Autumn immediately backed off.

"Eww," squealed Autumn.

"Gin, mate, don't take this the wrong way, but can we hug you later?" Lydia asked.
"Like, after you've had a shower and changed?"

Ginny tossed her hair back. "Huh! That's nice! I nearly get killed and all you two can think about is your outfits?" She reached out and touched her hair. "How bad is it?"

"Really bad," Lydia told her, looking mildly repulsed.

Autumn nodded in agreement. "Truly disgusting."

Ginny grimaced as she looked at herself. "Oh gods. I'll go and get changed." She made to leave, but found herself blocked by the sudden appearance of Draco Malfoy, looking unaccountably cheerful.

"What do you want?" she snapped at him.

Draco's face fell. "I just wanted to see if you were OK."

"Well, don't," Ginny glared at him. "Oh, and Draco."

"Yeah?"

"Next time you want to do me a favour... don't bother." And with that, she turned and stalked off, leaving a bewildered Draco behind her. Lydia and Autumn took one look at Draco, glared at him and followed their friend out.

"What did I do?" he asked, puzzled. Behind him, Pansy approached, patting him on the shoulder.

"Draco, honey, I think you'd best quit while you're ahead."

"Suppose," sighed Draco. He turned away, and came face to face with someone he'd not expected to see. Luella.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, too surprised to sneer at her. Unfortunately, Pansy had rather better recovery skills.

"Shouldn't you be at home?" she sneered.

"Should be," Luella replied, taking a step forward. "But I'm not." She drew her wand, forcing them both to take a step back.

"You're not allowed one of them!" squealed Pansy, cowering behind Draco. "You're expelled!"

Luella's grin widened. "Not any more! See, I saved Ginny's life, and then someone else revealed what had really been going on, and, well, I'm reinstated pending the paperwork."

"Ah." Draco and Pansy looked at each other, both thinking 'now what?'

Deanna came up to stand alongside her friend.

"We're not interested in your apologies, or your excuses."

"But luckily for you, we're also not concerned about revenge," Luella's gaze hardened. "Yet. Now get out of my sight."

They didn't need telling twice. The two second years turned and ran, heading for the safety of their respective dorms, leaving Luella and Deanna alone.

"Reckon they've learnt their lesson?" Deanna asked, rather half-heartedly.

Luella shrugged. "Who knows? But as long as they don't see me as the weak one of our little group any more, I don't care. Come on." She put an arm around Deanna's shoulders. "Let's go to bed."

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Rianne, meanwhile, had had a rather less eventful time of it. Madam Pomfrey, fussing over the Petrified students, took one look at them both and shrieked.

"What happened to you two?" she gasped. "You both look absolutely filthy! Come in right now, have a bath and get into some decent clothes!" She summoned some of the hospital wing house elves and ordered them to prepare a hot bath and a set of hospital robes, and to fetch a spare outfit from Lockhart's quarters, before turning back to Rianne.

"What has he done now?" she asked, exasperated. "He's not been trying to mend bones again, has he? Honestly, I've had more patients in here because of him than anyone else in the school. Including Professor Snape's and Madam Hooch's classes."

"He's lost his memory," Rianne explained. "Tried to cast a Memory Charm, and his wand exploded. He doesn't remember a thing."

"Doesn't remember..." Madam Pomfrey stared at her. "What, nothing?"

Rianne shook her head. "Nothing at all. Not even his own name."

"Really?" Madam Pomfrey began to smile. "What, really? Absolutely nothing?"

"Nothing," Rianne grinned. "It was the Obliviate Charm."

"The one that wipes out memories for good and is irreversible," Madam Pomfrey's grin was unmistakable. "Oh dear. Well, Gilderoy, unfortunately there's very little we can do about that, not here anyway. Still, why don't you clean yourself up and rest, and I'll have a word with Professor Snape and the staff at St. Mungo's in the morning."

Lockhart beamed at her. "Thank you, my dear. I don't believe I've had the pleasure?"

"Poppy Pomfrey, dear," said Madam Pomfrey soothingly as she led him away towards the bath the house elves had prepared.

"Such a lovely name! And where might I be?" Lockhart enquired pleasantly.

"You're in the hospital wing, my love. You've had a rather nasty shock, and you look like you've been through a lot, so we're going to give you a nice hot bath, and then a good night's sleep in a nice, warm, comfy bed and we'll see how you are in the morning." She left Lockhart in one of the bathrooms to get on with it before turning back to Rianne, eyebrows raised.

"Dare I ask where you two have been?"

"Run me a bath and I'll tell you," Rianne yawned, suddenly aware of how tired she was.

"Normally, I'd send you straight back to your dorm to get changed seeing as you're apparently healthy, but you've got me intrigued." She looked at Rianne carefully. "Tell you what, seeing as these will be waking up tomorrow, why don't you stay here overnight? It'd do them good to have someone here to fill them in on events, someone who isn't a teacher, I mean. Especially as one of them is a friend of yours anyway."

"Sounds good to me," Rianne agreed. And as the house-elves prepared her bath, she began to tell Madam Pomfrey what had happened.

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Morning finally dawned on the now-safe-for-humanity school. Rianne found herself woken up by the house-elves dusting the Petrified students, and Madam Pomfrey bustling around making sure everything was ready for the Grand Awakening.

"Wake up!" she cried, fussing at Rianne. "Nearly time, don't you know! Professor Snape's owled me to let me know that the potion is ready, so we'll be waking them up within the hour. Hurry up, child, get dressed. Professor Snape will be here soon and you don't want him seeing you half-naked, do you?"

Rianne privately thought that Snape would be rather more embarrassed than she would be by an encounter with her still in her nightwear, but she didn't say anything. The house elves had taken her old clothes away to be washed, and a new set had been brought up for her, so she busied herself getting dressed and brushing her hair. She had no sooner finished when Snape himself walked in. He didn't seem surprised to see her there.

"Ah, Miss Stormosi. The one absentee from last night's revels. Were you involved with the raid on the Chamber of Secrets as well?"

"Involved?" Rianne said, mildly outraged. "Sir, I *organised* it!"

"Should have known," Snape remarked. "So what are you up here for? You weren't hurt, I hope."

"Oh no," Rianne told him. "I had to escort Lockhart up here. He's in a bad way."

"Really?" Snape's eyes widened. "How bad? Is he alive? Did he die a painful and horribly violent death on a Basilisk's fangs?"

"No. He made it in one piece."

"Pity," Snape glanced around. "So where is he then?"

"In a private room," Madam Pomfrey said, very disapproving. "He tried to erase these poor children's memories, and I'm very glad to say it backfired on him. He can't remember a thing."

"What, nothing?"

"Nothing at all. Apparently it was Obliviate."

Snape couldn't have looked happier if he'd just been told Gryffindor had withdrawn from the House Cup competition and gifted the trophy to Slytherin.

"Oh happy, glorious day!" he sighed. "Poppy, I could kiss you!" He quickly reassumed his sober professional mask. "Of course, it's a very serious charm, Obliviate. Irreversible. Sometimes the memories return of their own accord, but it takes time, and rest. Clearly, he won't be able to return to teaching for a very long time, if ever."

Rianne and Madam Pomfrey couldn't resist cheering at this news.

"Don't suppose we can have a Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher without any Dark Arts knowledge after all, can we?" smiled Madam Pomfrey, wiping a tear from her eye.

"Oh, I don't know, we've managed alright this year," Rianne reflected as all three of them dissolved into pure, uninhibited laughter. Finally, the merriment subsided.

"Suppose we'd better wake them up, hadn't we?" Snape asked, surveying the students with only a slight curl of the lip. He reached into his bag and produced a vial of a deep purple liquid, sparkling a little in the light, and a funnel. "Would you care to do the honours, Poppy?"

Madam Pomfrey took the items from him and began to revive Riddle's victims one by one. Mrs. Norris took one look, screeched at them and ran out into the corridor. Rianne felt her heart sink. It had been quite nice having a Mrs. Norris-free school, she'd got rather used to it. Shame the wretched animal was back.

Next was Colin Creevey, who woke up, reached for his camera, found it wasn't there and stared at Madam Pomfrey.

"My camera!" he blinked.

"It got destroyed," Madam Pomfrey explained. "You were attacked..."

"By a big snake, I remember!" Colin interrupted, alive with excitement. "Miss, there's a huge snake loose in the school!"

"I know," Madam Pomfrey reassured him. "Don't worry, it's been got rid of now. It won't be back."

Justin, on waking up, said much the same thing, exclaiming that he'd been talking to Nearly Headless Nick and "there it was, a bloody great big snake, looking right back at me, don't you know! Gave me the most awful fright."

Penelope didn't say much, just shaking and whispering about "the eyes! Those horrible eyes! What was it?"

Her question was soon answered as Madam Pomfrey revived Hermione. The Gryffindor sat bolt upright as soon as the potion touched her lips.

"A Basilisk!" she yelled. "It's a Basilisk! And the diary, we've got to find the diary, it's evil."

Rianne went to sit beside her. So Marlie and Hermione had known what was going on. She'd thought as much.

"It's alright," she told her. "It's dead."

"The diary or the snake?" Hermione asked.

"Both," smiled Rianne.

Next to her, Madam Pomfrey administered the potion to Marlie. Who, true to form, provided the most dramatic reaction of them all.

"*GINNY!*" she screamed on waking, almost leaping out of bed and staring about panic-stricken. "I have to find Ginny, she's in so much trouble!" She noticed Rianne sitting next to her and lost no time in grabbing her. "Ri! The diary, Ginny's got it, Voldemort's possessed her, it's *her*!"

"Chill, Marlie," Rianne reassured her. "I know."

"You know?" gasped Marlie. "But..."

"But nothing," Rianne told her. "Ginny's fine, the Basilisk's dead, and the diary's been neutralised. Everything's gonna be just fine."

"You got the diary?"

"We got the diary."

Marlie sank back down on to the bed, clasping her hand to her chest with relief.

"Thank God," she whispered. Suddenly, she realised something and began feeling around her throat, looking for something. She didn't find it.

"My necklace. It's not here." She began frantically hunting for it. "Where's my necklace? Who took my necklace?!"

"Deanna," Rianne replied. "She didn't want anyone walking off with it. Think Lu's got it now."

"She hasn't," Snape interrupted. "Dumbledore took it last night, and he's given it to me. Here you are. Your necklace, Miss Lovegood." He held it out and dropped it into her waiting hands. Marlie lost no time in fastening it around her neck, clasping the Snitch and sighing contentedly. Until she realised something else, and her eyes shot open.

"Lu's back?" she asked, incredulous.

"She is?" gasped Hermione from the next bed.

"She was gone?" asked Penelope, scratching her head in confusion.

"Oh boy, have you guys missed out," sighed Rianne. "Sit back and listen up, folks, we have had one hell of a year..."

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The others weren't slow in getting out of bed either. As soon as the curfew ended and the common room doors unlocked themselves, the small group that had gathered in Snape's office the previous evening reconvened in the Entrance Hall.

Deanna and Luella, followed by Ginny and her friends, who had by now been fully updated on the whole story, emerged into daylight, meeting Harry and Ron, who were on their way down. Nothing was said by any of them. It didn't feel right or even necessary. Luella just went straight up to Harry and gave him a hug, while Deanna approached Ron and gave him a high-five. Ron returned the gesture with a smile, before turning to his sister and giving her a hug.

They remained there for several minutes, no one speaking, just smiling, until they were joined by Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and Dumbledore. The Weasleys gave Deanna a formal handshake before Mrs. Weasley embraced Ginny and Mr. Weasley gave Ron a pat on the back. Dumbledore watched indulgently.

"Such affection," he smiled. "It's good to see the family reunited at last."

"I'm just glad they're all alive," said Mrs. Weasley, wiping a tear from her eye.

And then the quiet dissolved as a door opened somewhere upstairs, and the clamour of footsteps and voices echoed down the corridor.

First to come pounding down the stairs was Marlie.

"Ginny!" she yelled, spotting the first year immediately. "Are you alright?"

Ginny stepped forward, nodding happily. "I'm fine. Thanks to you."

Marlie went over to her and gave her a hug. "Thanks to me, nothing. Harry and Lu did the hard work. So Ri tells me."

"Yeah, but your necklace saved Lu," Ginny pointed out.

"Yes, it did, didn't it?" Marlie purred, getting up and looking for Luella. The two girls locked eyes, and Marlie walked over, smiling.

"Luie, baby! Nice to see ya, girlie!"

"And you!" laughed Luella, falling into an embrace. She fingered the necklace, now restored to its rightful owner. "Thank Morticia for me, will you?"

"She already knows," Marlie replied. She released Luella and turned to Deanna. "And you! Necklace thief!"

"Excuse me, Lu's lifesaver as it turned out!" Deanna protested, half-joking as she hugged her friend. "Anyway, if not me, someone else would have had it."

Marlie fingered the chain. "What, for the really valuable chain, one of Elizabeth Duke's finest? Yeah, right."

"They might!" Deanna protested.

"They wouldn't," said Marlie confidently. "Tisha has a nasty habit of burning the hand of anyone who tries to touch this thing with less than pure motives."

"Rather odd, considering that last time I met her, she tried to kill me," Deanna remarked.

"Eh, she's entitled to change her mind," shrugged Marlie.

It was at this point that another figure came running downstairs. This time, it was Hermione, who jumped down the steps two at a time and flung herself around Harry and Ron screaming "You did it! You did it!"

"Thanks to you!" laughed Harry as he hugged her. "We would never have known what the monster was without you!"

Hermione just gave them both a delighted hug before rushing over to find Luella.

"Lu, did you really use the Killing Curse on the diary?" she asked in awe.

"Had to get rid of it somehow," Luella smiled nonchalantly, fingering the end of her wand, safely tucked away in the borrowed school robes of Deanna's that she was wearing. "Anyway, you were pretty smart yourself! If you hadn't told Marlie to use a mirror, she'd be dead, the necklace would no longer work and I'd still be down there!"

Hermione looked at her feet, blushing fit to burst. "It was nothing," she whispered. "I just had the idea and..."

"Used it," finished Marlie. "Thanks, kid." She smiled warmly at the young Gryffindor, and the two of them shook hands.

Next to arrive was Percy Weasley, coming out of the Great Hall to see what all the fuss was about.

"What's going on here, all this shouting and screaming..." He saw his parents standing there. "Mum! Dad! Er... hello."

"Percy!" smiled Mrs. Weasley. "There you are! Why did you never tell us before?"

"Tell you what?" asked Percy warily.

"About your lovely girlfriend, of course!" cried Mr. Weasley, walking over and patting his son on the back. "Well done, lad, never knew you had it in you!"

Percy went crimson and immediately began stuttering and stammering. "I... yes... that is to say... er..." He looked up and saw another figure on the stairs. "Penny?"

Indeed it was. Penelope Clearwater saw him, smiled, and ran down the stairs to greet him.

"Percy!" she smiled, coming to a halt in front of him before remembering no one was meant to know about the two of them. "Hello," she said, rather formally.

Percy looked at her, seeing her alive and breathing for the first time in months, fighting his embarrassment at admitting he had a girlfriend in public, and the impulse to make up for lost time. Finally, the memory of the horrible loneliness of the last three months decided him.

"Penny. Oh Penny, I'm so glad you're back!" he breathed, before pulling her into a hug and kissing her. This was met with rapturous applause from all the spectators.

The three Slytherins and Hermione exchanged looks that all said "Bless!", "Aww!", "How cute!" or thoughts along those lines.

"Go on son, get in there!" Mr. Weasley called before his wife stopped him with a hissed "Arthur!" While Ron and Ginny both began to chant quietly "Percy's got a girlfriend, Percy's got a girlfriend..."

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley snapped at him.

"Ginny was doing it too!"

Ginny promptly poked her tongue out at him.

"I don't care!" sighed Mrs. Weasley. "Will you both pack it in! Honestly, wish I'd stopped with Percy sometimes, I really do..."

Percy finally broke off, leaving Penny rearranging her glasses, which had nearly fallen off. She was pink but happy.

"Ooh! Percy! Thank you," she whispered, shining with happiness.

"It's nothing," he told her. "You're my girlfriend, it's my job." He traced a finger down her cheek, smiling. "Welcome back, Pen."

Penelope smiled back, seemingly about to burst with joy. She hugged him again, before noticing Luella.

"Lu!" she cried, letting Percy go and running over to her cousin. "You're OK!"

"So are you!" laughed Luella as the two girls embraced. "Nice to see you with us again!"

"And you," smiled Penelope. "Rianne told us all what had happened. Did you really get expelled?"

Luella nodded. "Yeah. Lucius Malfoy broke my wand himself. Of course, I've got a new one now. Present from Caitlin Tyler, hand made by her mum and officially unbreakable." She produced the wand for Penelope to see.

"Nice!" said Penelope as she traced her fingers down the wand's impossibly smooth surface. "You can feel the magic, can't you?"

"I'm told there's an unfinished spell still in there," Luella told her. "Not sure what it does, mind you, but I'm sure we'll find out sooner or later."

"Later, hopefully," Penelope shuddered. "Wands with magical residue left in them can be very unpredictable. Hope you know what you're doing." She abandoned the lecture with a smile. "So, Lu. Do I have you to thank for Percy's change in attitude?" She beckoned her boyfriend over, slipping an arm around him. He still looked faintly embarrassed, but he seemed to be coping rather well.

"Yeah. Sorry," Luella admitted. "Went and let slip that you two knew each other in front of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, and they kind of guessed. Sorry."

Percy appeared a little stern at hearing this, but Luella could tell he wasn't really angry.

"Not how I'd have chosen for them to find out," he sniffed. Then he relaxed into a smile. "But at least you're back." He took Penelope into his arms again. "Gods, it's been hell without you."

"Was it really four months?" Penelope asked, amazed. Percy just nodded, the look on his face saying it all.

"Then let's not ever let it be that long again!" Penelope declared, before turning to Luella. "Thank you! You don't know what this means to me, you know."

Luella smiled modestly. "It was nothing. Don't mention it."

Penelope just smiled in return as Percy started to lead her away.

"And now we've finished catching up with your family, I think it's about time you were introduced to mine. Mother, Father, there's someone I'd like you both to meet..." He led her over to where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were waiting with open arms, ready to welcome her.

And then the final member of the extended Weasley-Tyler-Potter-Martin-Lovegood-Granger-Stormosi dark-magic-fighting family arrived. Rianne Stormosi, arm in arm with...

"My god," said Deanna. "It's Dame Edna."

"Who's Dame Edna?" asked Ron.

"Australian novelty performer," Harry explained. He looked at where Deanna was staring. "Looks an awful lot like that."

Everyone else turned to look. And stare. It was none other than Gilderoy Lockhart. In a sparkly set of deep blue witches' robes, his hair tied back and hidden under a golden

turban, a handbag over one arm, his face covered in make-up and a pair of emerald green high heeled shoes on his feet.

"Careful there, Martha," Rianne was saying. "You know you're not used to walking in these shoes yet. Don't want you to fall, do we now?"

"Martha?" the older Weasleys said in unison, staring at this apparition in fascination.

"Professor Lockhart?" Hermione gasped in horror. She ran forward to get a better look at him before turning to Rianne in fury. "What have you done to him?" she yelled at her.

"Gave her a make-over," yawned Rianne. She noticed that Hermione looked ready to slap her. "What? Look, he... she... wants to be a woman. Deal! Oh, Martha, this is Hermione Granger. Hermione, meet Martha Lockhart."

"Hello, dear!" Lockhart beamed. He traced an expertly manicured finger along her hair. "You must tell me how you manage to get your hair to look so nice! It looks lovely."

"Er... thanks," said Hermione, too stunned to know how to react. "Erm... who did your outfit?"

"Rianne here, mostly, with a little help from a rather nice young lady called Marlie. And do you know, they showed me the funniest thing. They took me to this little room, with a big mirror, and lots of clothes and hair styling equipment, and it was covered, from floor to ceiling, in all these pictures of me! Can you believe it?" Lockhart laughed. "Anyway, they set to work straight away, Marlie changing the men's shoes there into proper women's ones, and then adapting the robes too, and the two of them set to work making me over. Very good at it they were too, I must say. Do you like it?"

"It's lovely," lied Hermione.

From a safe distance, Deanna and Luella were watching all this with Marlie.

"Do I detect your handiwork in all this, Marls?" Deanna remarked.

"Oh yeah," nodded Marlie. "He wanted a make-over from an expert and hey, who was I to deny my services?"

"Thought you preferred him male?" Luella teased.

Marlie just shrugged. "Well, you can go off people. Anyway," she sniffed, brushing her hair back over her shoulder, "he kept pronouncing my name wrong. Kept calling me Mar-leen," She folded her arms, a little bit miffed. "I hate being called Mar-leen."

Snape was last to arrive. He looked Lockhart up and down. He didn't look surprised.

"I always did wonder about you, Gilderoy."

"Martha," Rianne corrected him. "He's called Martha now. Martha, this is Professor Severus Snape. He teaches Potions."

"Does he now?" Lockhart beamed. "Are you the one I need to see about a Sex Change Potion?"

Snape looked Lockhart over. "You seem to be managing rather well without one so far."

"I do?" Lockhart clasped his hands to his chest. "Oh, thank you! You are so kind!"

"Don't mention it, Gil - sorry, Martha."

Mrs. Weasley approached Snape. "Is there nothing that can be done for him?" she asked sadly. "You know, to bring his memories back?" Dumbledore had already broken the news about Lockhart's amnesia to the Weasleys.

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Weasley," said Snape gravely, successfully managing to conceal a smirk. "All that can be done is to hope his memories return eventually. Of course, if he's happy with his new identity, he may as well continue in it."

"Seems such a shame though," sighed Mrs. Weasley. "Such a waste of a talent. I mean, look at him, he looks ridiculous."

"No change there then," Snape and Mr. Weasley said in unison, trying to look innocent as Mrs. Weasley glared at them both.

And then the main doors opened and a shadow fell across the room that cut all conversation dead in its tracks. Everyone turned to look and let their voices die away as they saw just who had arrived to gatecrash the party. Silhouetted in the doorway was the formidable form of Lucius Malfoy. And he did not look pleased.

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Instinctively, everyone drew closer to Dumbledore. While Lucius was unlikely to start flinging hexes around in the middle of a school, you could never tell, and he didn't seem to be in a good mood. Trailing behind him was a small, diminutive creature with big eyes and pointy ears. It looked like it had been in a fight. A very one-sided fight.

"What is that?" whispered Hermione.

"A house elf," Marlie told her. "We keep them as servants, my mum's got one. They don't all look like they've been steam rollered though," she added hastily as Hermione's eyes flared in righteous indignation. The terrified elf retired to a quiet corner, staring wide-eyed as Lucius came to do battle.

He strode in, his face a very mask of rage, and pointed a finger at Dumbledore.

"You!" he hissed. "You... you're suspended! And yet you dared to come back?"

"Not my idea, Lucius," Dumbledore replied affably. "The other governors asked me to come back. Well, I say asked. As soon as they heard that Arthur Weasley's daughter had been killed, I found myself deluged in a veritable avalanche of owls, all demanding I return at once. Apparently they had no confidence in anyone other than me to manage things. Rather strange things they had to say for themselves, Lucius. Some of them appeared to be under the distinct impression that you'd threatened their families if they hadn't pushed for my resignation in the first place."

Lucius snarled but soon regained his composure. "I may have informed some of the more recalcitrant members of the governing body that their children might be next if something was not done."

"Interesting," said Dumbledore thoughtfully. "They told me that you'd said much the same thing when they debated expelling Miss Martin too. Most of them were under the impression she should have stayed too."

Lucius noticed Luella for the first time. "You're expelled, girl!" he snarled at her. Luella just smiled. She'd faced far worse, after all.

"Not any more," she said, casually twirling her wand. "But if you really want to break my wand in two again, you're quite welcome. Here," She tossed the wand over to him. All around the room, people began smirking. The story of where Luella's new wand had come from was known by now to most of them, as was the reason why it hadn't been buried with its maker. However, Lucius wasn't one of them. Sneering, he took the wand in hand and tried to snap it. Without success. He tried again. No luck. This time he applied more pressure, grunting with the strain. The wand stubbornly refused to budge. By now, the entire room was grinning, real Cheshire Cat grins, and Ginny and Hermione were both starting to giggle. Seeing this and driven to desperation, Lucius drew his own wand.

"Very well," he snarled. "Let's see how it stands up to this!" He pressed his wand tip against Luella's wand. "*Severo!*"

It proved to be the worst move he could have made. Magic exploded out of his wand, sending him flying backwards and Luella's wand flying in the opposite direction. Luella lost no time in retrieving it. It was completely undamaged.

Which was more than could be said for Lucius Malfoy's ego. The entire room had dissolved into a collective fit of laughter, and the general hilarity only increased as he picked himself up and glared at them all.

"I shall remember this!" he snarled at them.

"As will we, Lucius," grinned Snape. "For a very, very long time."

Lucius shot Snape a look of pure poison. Retrieving his own wand, he strode over to the Potions Master.

"You will pay for that, Snape. One day. I promise," hissed Lucius.

For a brief moment, something like fear flickered through Snape's eyes. But it was soon gone as he glanced over Lucius's shoulder and saw something Lucius was as yet unaware of.

"I wouldn't threaten me if I were you, Lucius," he replied calmly.

"Or you'll do what, Professor?" Lucius sneered.

"I?" Snape widened his eyes in mock innocence. "I will do nothing." He smiled maliciously at Lucius. "I'll leave it to her."

Lucius turned around. And saw that he wasn't the only visitor to the school. Standing in the doorway, a Hogwarts trunk which Luella recognised as hers floating by her side, was the figure of the one and only Caitlin Tyler. In her black Auror uniform, golden Commander-in-Chief badge fully visible. She had clearly been watching for a while.

"Getting into fights again, Lucius?" She stepped into the room, carefully pushing the chest to one side. "Better watch yourself. I wouldn't want to have to arrest you, would I?"

Lucius backed off. "Calm yourself," he said coldly. "I'm not interested in picking a fight with your beloved Severus."

"Glad to hear it," Caitlin replied. "Our public servants have a right to go about their lawful duties without having to deal with aggression from angry parents." She regarded him as one would a cockroach in one's kitchen. "So what are you here for exactly, if not to assault teachers?"

"On business," Lucius replied sharply, brushing the dust from his robes. "Inquiring as to why an expelled pupil is back, with a wand and wearing school uniform again. For which I have still to receive an adequate explanation!" He rounded on Luella. "Well, girl? Care to explain yourself?"

"Leave her alone," snapped Caitlin. "Speak to her with a civil tongue in your head or not at all."

"Stay out of this, Auror," Lucius hissed. "This is Hogwarts business." However, he did leave Luella alone, picking on Dumbledore instead. "Well, Headmaster?"

"Certainly, Lucius," Dumbledore replied, unmoved by his outburst. "You see, we have succeeded in halting the attacks for good, and not only that, we unmasked the real culprit and it wasn't Miss Martin here. So it was decided to allow her to return."

"I see," said Lucius, his voice not quite at absolute zero but not far off it. "And who, pray, was the real culprit?"

"Oh, the same person as last time," said Dumbledore. "Except this time he was acting through someone else. Using this diary."

He produced the diary again, watching Lucius's reaction very carefully indeed. Lucius, to give him his due, hid his desire to swear very well, no mean feat with Albus Dumbledore, Severus Snape and Arthur Weasley watching him like hawks, and Caitlin Tyler standing right behind him.

Rianne, however, had noticed something else. Turning to one with more experience in these matters, she whispered to Marlie,

"Marls, what's up with the self-harming house elf?"

Marlie turned to look at the Malfoy house elf. He was staring at Harry, pointing first to the diary, then at Lucius, then promptly slapping himself around the face. Marlie frowned.

"Well, they're instructed to punish themselves if they're ever disloyal to their lawful masters, I wonder if that's it..."

Hermione gave a little gasp of horror. Harry, however, suddenly realised what the house elf was trying to tell him.

"Of course," he whispered. "That's it!" He looked at Lucius in an entirely different light. "It was you, wasn't it? You were the one who gave Ginny the diary. You slipped it into her Transfiguration book that day in Flourish and Blott's. That's why you picked a fight with Mr. Weasley. You wanted to cause a distraction so no one would notice."

As soon as he heard this, Mr. Weasley went pale and stepped forward, clearly intent on picking up where he'd left off back in August. "Is this true, Malfoy?" he barked, already drawing a fist back.

"Arthur!" cried Mrs. Weasley, holding him back. Snape joined her.

"I'd listen to your wife if I were you," he said through gritted teeth. "Lucius Malfoy's very dangerous when cornered. Best to let Caitlin get on with it."

"Is that a good idea, if he's so dangerous?" Mrs. Weasley asked. Snape shook his head.

"I wouldn't worry about her, she knows as many hexes as he does and she doesn't fight fair either," Snape told her.

Lucius had gone a very unusual shade of white, and was looking panic-stricken, his eyes darting from face to face. However, he refused to admit defeat.

"You'll never prove any of it," he snarled.

"Maybe not," said Caitlin, her voice dangerously soft as she stood right behind him, her face mere inches from his. "This time. But we'll be watching you, Malfoy. One step out of line, Malfoy, one tiny little mistake, the smallest infraction, and we'll have you. Mel's been after an excuse to have your hide for years. One chance, Lucius. That's all we need. So be careful out there. Got me?"

Lucius just glared at her.

"Good," Caitlin purred, turning his face towards her with a single finger. Her own face twisted into its own savage mask of fury. "Now get out of my sight!"

Lucius staggered back, before composing himself.

"Don't worry," he hissed. "I'm going! Dobby!" He called to his house-elf as he turned and stalked out. Whimpering, the house-elf scurried after him.

Cheering broke out as soon as he'd gone, with both Harry and Caitlin getting more than their fair share of pats on the back for standing up to him. Mr. Weasley in particular couldn't stop shaking her hand.

"Caitlin, I can't say how pleased I am to see you standing up to him like that! After all the trouble he's caused for my little girl this year...!"

"Arthur, don't worry," Caitlin reassured him. "I'm just doing my job. I only wish I could have nailed him for it," she sighed.

"Well, at least you know what sort of thing he's got lying around now," Mrs. Weasley pointed out. "Can't you get a warrant to raid his home or something?"

"Been done," sighed Caitlin. "He's too good. But we can but try." She noticed Snape watching her with a smile. "Hello there, Severus. So, what exactly makes you think I'll go running off to fight every wizard who dares to threaten you, then?"

Snape bowed. "I would never dare to presume that you'd fight all my battles for me, Caitlin." He raised his head and smiled. "But what I do know is that you'd go after Lucius Malfoy for *anyone*."

"True enough!" she laughed.

Harry, meanwhile, was tugging at Dumbledore's sleeve. "Sir," he asked, rather breathlessly. "could I borrow the diary for a bit? There's something I need to do."

"Certainly," replied Dumbledore, passing him the book. "Be careful, won't you, we do need it back."

"I will," Harry promised as he ran for the doors.

"Where are you going?" asked Caitlin, alarmed.

"I won't be long, Mrs. Tyler!" he called back. "I just need to repay a favour."

"Well, be careful, won't you?" she warned him. "Lucius Malfoy is a very dangerous wizard. If he tries anything, call me. I'll be watching from the door way."

"I will!" called Harry as he ran out of the door, stopping only to remove his right shoe and sock, and use the sock to wrap the diary in.

"What is he doing?" asked Rianne. "Trying to knock Malfoy out with the smell?"

Marlie, however, began to understand. "I think I see," she said thoughtfully. She turned to Hermione. "It's alright, you can stop worrying. That house elf's troubles might just be over." Sure enough, Marlie was proved right. Caitlin, who was watching from the door way, gave a shriek of delight.

"Harry, you absolute genius!" she cried. "Lily and James would have been so proud!"

Then came a roar of fury from Lucius.

"You've lost me my servant, boy!"

Caitlin's expression turned from delight to alarm as she produced her wand and stepped forward. But she needn't have worried. Next was the sound of the house elf, Dobby, subservient and quivering no more.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter!"

There was a very loud bang and the sound of Lucius Malfoy cursing, and not in the magical sense either.

"You shall not harm Harry Potter! You shall go now!"

More swearing from Lucius. Then silence out there. Caitlin turned and rejoined them.

"Perfect," she laughed. "Just perfect! Not only is he totally humiliated, but Narcissa's going to hit the roof when she finds out what's happened!"

"Why, what did he do?" asked Hermione.

"Set the house elf free," Caitlin told her. "He tricked Lucius into giving the diary, still wrapped in a sock, to the house elf. And, of course, when you give a house elf clothes..."

"You release them!" Marlie laughed. "Of course! Cool!"

Harry returned, jubilantly waving the diary above his head. "I did it! I freed Dobby!" he laughed, as he presented Dumbledore with the diary once more.

"You did indeed," Dumbledore smiled. "Well done, Harry."

"He's not having a good day, is he?" Deanna remarked. "What else is going to go wrong for him, do you think?"

"Quite a bit," Dumbledore told her. "I mentioned earlier that the other governors all owled me last night. Well, what I haven't yet told you is that every single one is going to submit a motion to sack Lucius Malfoy." He waited for the assorted cheers to subside before continuing.

"Indeed. This of course means that Miss Weasley's total exoneration and Miss Martin's reinstatement are virtually guaranteed. However, it also has one other consequence. It means we're going to need a new parent governor." He fixed his eye on Caitlin and the Weasleys.

"Not me," said Caitlin swiftly. "Unlike Malfoy, I actually have a full-time job to go to."

"Same here," sighed Mr. Weasley. "Ever since my PA quit last month, I've been up to my neck in work. Last thing I need's another responsibility."

All eyes turned to Mrs. Weasley, who immediately started blushing. "Surely not!" she gasped. "I mean... I couldn't possibly... I've got no experience! And a household to run!"

"Molly, I can assure you that no specific experience is required for the position," Dumbledore told her. "Personal qualities are far more important, and you have them in abundance."

"Oh! But what about this lot?" She indicated her husband and children.

"We're at school half the time anyway!" Ron pointed out. "We'll manage."

"Yeah, don't worry about us!" Ginny nudged her mother. "Go for it, you'd be good!"

"Well..." Mrs. Weasley hesitated, looking torn. It was Rianne who finally swung it.

"Mrs. Weasley," she began, "what if I could get you someone to pop in and do some housework for you? You know, cleaning, tidying, ironing, all that sort of thing."

"Could you?" asked Mrs. Weasley. "How?"

Rianne indicated Lockhart. "Mrs. Lockhart here. I mean, she was going to come and live with us, act as our live-in housekeeper, take over all the housework from Debra so she can finally get a decent job, well she still is, but what if I sent her over to your place a couple of days a week to help you out? Free up some time to go to governors' meetings for you."

"Really? Oh, but I couldn't possibly..." Mrs. Weasley protested.

"It's no trouble!" Rianne smiled. She turned to Lockhart. "Sound like a good idea to you?"

"Sounds great fun!" Lockhart beamed, rather vacantly. "When can I start?"

"As soon as everything's sorted out," Rianne promised.

Mrs. Weasley arrived at a decision.

"Well, if you're sure you don't mind..."

"Not at all!" smiled Rianne.

"Well, in that case..." Mrs. Weasley turned to Dumbledore with a smile. "Very well, Albus. I'll stand!"

"Thank you, Molly." Dumbledore smiled. "I'm sure you'll do very well."

"Yay!" yelled Ron and Ginny together.

"Mum's going to be a governor!" shouted Ginny.

"Won't Malfoy be sick as pigs when he hears this!" laughed Ron.

Mr. Weasley looked rather thoughtful.

"Did you say your sister Debra was looking for a job?"

Rianne nodded. "That's right. She's got a part-time one in the local occult store, but it's not what she's really after. Only she can't go for anything better because she's got to look after Dad. That's why I wanted Lockhart as a housekeeper."

"Organised, is she?"

"Without doubt."

"Good with people?"

"Unfailingly courteous."

"Intelligent?"

Rianne snorted. "Please. Of course she is."

"Interested in a Ministry job? Specifically, personal assistant to the Head of the Department of Misuse of Muggle Artefacts?"

"She'd love the idea," Rianne laughed.

"Excellent!" sighed Mr. Weasley. "I'll write and ask her to send a CV today! Good PAs are so hard to come by, you know, Molly."

"Never know, I might need one if I'm to be a school governor," laughed Mrs. Weasley, linking arms with her husband and moving away.

Caitlin turned to Luella as the little group began to break up, Dumbledore inviting them all in for the breakfast feast.

"Well! I gather you and Harry are quite the heroes of the hour!"

"Harry killed a Basilisk," Luella told her.

"And Lu used Lord Voldemort's own hex against him!" Harry said.

Caitlin grinned knowingly at Luella. "Nice to know all the training paid off!"

"I had help," Luella admitted. "Marlie's necklace saved me."

Caitlin put her arms around both Harry and Luella. "Well, however you managed it, I am immensely proud of you both. Luella, you are a genius. And as for you, Harry..." She stopped and turned to look him straight in the eye. "That was incredibly brave of you. Your parents would have been proud."

Harry didn't answer, too overcome with embarrassment and pride to string a coherent reply together. Caitlin smiled and led him into the Great Hall, where a party was already in full swing.

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Not everyone was celebrating, however. As the Entrance Hall cleared, Draco Malfoy and Pansy Parkinson emerged from their hiding place. They'd heard everything, including Lucius Malfoy's public humiliation and loss of the family house elf.

"Well, I wouldn't want to be your father when he gets home," commented Pansy. "If my dad lost the family house elf, my mum'd kill him."

Draco didn't answer. He was still staring at the doorway which his father had so unceremoniously left by.

"Draco?" Pansy prodded. "What's up?"

"He started it all," said Draco quietly. "My father. Planted the diary."

"Don't tell me you were surprised," said Pansy derisively. "You know how eager he was to get Martin expelled."

"He could have killed Lovegood," said Draco. "And Weasley too. I don't care about the others, but Weasley and Lovegood..." He rounded on Pansy. "They're part of us, Pansy! You know, Slytherins." Draco folded his arms, staring at his feet. "I never thought he'd go for fellow Slytherins."

"You went for Martin," Pansy not unreasonably pointed out.

"That's different," Draco waved her objections aside dismissively. "She's... one of them. The enemy. You know, Tal-y-Rhys. Weasley and Lovegood weren't."

"They're allied to them," Pansy said. "Don't they know not to get in the line of fire yet?"

"That's not the point!" snapped Draco. "I didn't know my father could do that. I mean, who knew who the diary could have gone after? It could think for itself, after all."

Anything could have happened." He shook his head. "I didn't think he was like that. Didn't think he could be so callous over a political point."

"Draco, you're getting soft in your old age," Pansy teased.

"Maybe," said Draco quietly. "Or maybe I don't want to be known as the son of a murderer." He motioned for Pansy to follow as he headed into the Great Hall. Pansy trailed after him, pausing to stare at the still open doors. She wasn't sure just what had happened, but something momentous had just taken place, as if the certainties of over a thousand years had just crumbled entirely into the dust. Turning away, she followed Draco out.

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The breakfast celebration went on for quite some time. Word had already got around, and by now most of the school had heard an edited version of the story of how Harry and Luella had made their way to the Chamber and taken on Voldemort and a Basilisk. When Luella and Harry themselves made an entrance, all hell broke loose as the cheering nearly lifted the roof off. Harry scurried over to the relative safety of the Gryffindor table as soon as possible, where he found himself mobbed by his housemates. Luella, meanwhile, too glad to be back to get embarrassed, tweaked her appearance with a weak Glamour and proceeded across the room to the Slytherin table, all the while soaking in the applause like a true star. Grinning with pride, Caitlin followed her over, murmuring "Vive la difference."

The feast proceeded in like fashion, with much food and drink being consumed despite the early hour, much cheering and merriment, and Luella retelling the story of what had happened in the Chamber for Caitlin's benefit.

"Amazing," said Caitlin. "Truly amazing. I am very impressed. Well done! What happened to the sword?"

"In the trophy cabinet," Deanna told her, slightly sulky. "I wanted to keep it, but Dumbledore and Snape both reckoned I was 'too young'. Huh."

"Probably worried you might decapitate someone with it," Caitlin remarked with a smile.

"Mother!" Deanna protested. "Have you not taught me better than that? As if I'd lose control with it and accidentally hurt someone!"

"It's not the accidental injuries that bother me," said Caitlin, scrutinising her daughter with a knowing look that spoke volumes. Deanna got her meaning at once and immediately began protesting again, before changing tactics and trying to persuade her mother that it was a crying shame to keep such a fantastic sword locked up in a cabinet, going to waste like that. Marlie took advantage of the situation to motion Rianne away.

"What's up, Marls?" she asked. "You look concerned."

Marlie indicated Lockhart, sitting vacantly next to Rianne, beaming at everyone in sight, happily oblivious to the stares they were giving him.

"Well, it's all very well and good him going off to be your housekeeper and all, but that leaves us with a problem, does it not?"

"I can't imagine what," remarked Rianne. "We get our housework done for us, Debs can get a cool new Ministry job with Mr. Weasley, and next year, who knows, we might even get a competent and not-evil Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher. Marls, there is no downside here."

"There is," sighed Marlie. "Slyths cannot live on the sweepstake alone, especially when I have to try and work on that TV I promised Ginny. Bloody thing keeps sucking all the magic out of the magical field, rendering all magic useless in its vicinity. I'll need money to try and fix the thing, and our collective incomes are about to take a nosedive. Syndicate, Ri, Syndicate."

"Syndicate..." Rianne's face fell. "Darn."

"Exactly. With Lockhart gone, that's no assignments to forge, and no money for us. What do we do, Ri?" Marlie asked.

"Well, we could wind it up..." sighed Rianne. "Or, we could find another teacher who everyone finds dull and who sets pointless assignments, who probably won't notice."

"Potions?" Marlie suggested.

"Don't be a fool, Snape would see straight through it. Besides," and here Rianne looked at Marlie rather pointedly, "some of us happen to like Potions."

"OK, OK, point taken," sniffed Marlie. She gave some thought to all the other lessons she found tedious. Most of them, which didn't get her very far. "Astronomy's a bit pointless, in my view, but you can't really fake that. Anyway, suppose not everyone has the benefit of my vast scientific expertise, after all. Same with Herbology, it's all too practical."

"Exactly," smiled Rianne, something evidently on her mind. "Think largely theoretical subjects."

"Theory... hmm. That's most of them out, they virtually all require some practical work, apart from..." It hit her. "History of Magic! Only the most dull subject in the school!"

"Precisely," purred Rianne. "It's compulsory, dull and eminently fakeable. They'll be falling on their knees to get out of the homework, and more importantly, throwing their money at us."

"Cool!" laughed Marls. She shook Rianne by the hand. "We are geniuses."

"What are you two doing over there?" Caitlin called over. "Up to something?"

"Me? Up to something?" Marlie fluttered her eyelids. "As if!"

"Silly me, you'd never even dream of plotting behind someone's back, would you?" Caitlin looked at her knowingly. "What were you two talking about anyway?"

"History of Magic," Rianne replied promptly. Caitlin rolled her eyes.

"Now I know you were planning something. Might I ask why?"

"Oh, just discussing a few study tips. I'm going to help Marls improve her marks." Rianne said, remaining studiously offhand.

Caitlin was not convinced, but did not press the point. "I see. Well, good luck with it. Rianne, I was just discussing with Deanna the possibility of us borrowing Lockhart as well. Mostly during the holidays, of course."

"Don't see why not," Rianne shrugged. "If anyone needs a housekeeper, it's surely you guys."

"Here, here," Deanna commented. Caitlin, blushing, swiftly looked away to where Lydia and Ginny were involved in an argument with Autumn.

"Something up?"

"I still say they won't like it!" Autumn was insisting. "You know what the Ministry's like, put a toe out of line and they're on to you! Surely they'll want to punish her!"

"Autumn, you're overreacting, anyway it wasn't her curse, was it? It was his, she just deflected it." Lydia dismissed her friend's concerns.

Ginny noticed Caitlin watching them, and motioned for them both to be quiet.

"Look, let's just ask her and have done!" She turned to Caitlin with a smile. "Mrs. Tyler, what's the Ministry position on Unforgivable Curses?"

Caitlin frowned. "Ginny, they're strictly illegal and using them on a fellow human without authorisation from the Ministry will earn you ten years in Azkaban. Surely you know that, and if you don't, Lydia will."

"Told you!" hissed Autumn. "We'll never see her again!"

"See who again?" Caitlin asked.

"Luella," said Lydia. "Autumn reckons that she's going to get in terrible trouble for using the Killing Curse on Tom Riddle."

This got Luella's attention immediately. "I'm not, am I?"

"No of course not," Caitlin reassured her.

"See?" Lydia told Autumn. "Said she'd be fine. After all, she was acting in self-defence."

"Precisely," smiled Caitlin. "See, while the Ministry may be dead set against anyone using them, you're forgetting that Melissa Lovegood decides who in practice gets prosecuted. And she is of the opinion that anything which saves us having to deal with dangerous dark mages is a good thing. So, she's made it official policy that if anyone uses an Unforgivable against you without proper authorisation, you are entitled to use any means necessary to defend yourself. If that involves turning their own curse against them, then so be it. Anyone who flings curses like that around deserves all they get. Anyway, you're forgetting something. Unforgivables are forbidden when used on humans. But when used on inanimate objects, even ones that have been enchanted..."

"They're perfectly acceptable!" finished Luella.

"Exactly. Autumn, dear, you can stop worrying," Caitlin told her.

Autumn appeared relieved by this, although more than a little embarrassed as Ginny and Lydia began to tease her. However, they didn't get the chance to do much. At the far end of the Hall, Dumbledore was getting to his feet.

The entire room fell silent as the Headmaster called for attention.

"Thank you, children, thank you," he smiled at them. "Now, as most of you must surely by now be aware, this is a day of celebration. We have found out who was causing the attacks, and they have been duly punished. Suffice it to say that there will be no more Petrifications." He waited until the cheering died down before continuing.

"It is the wish of all staff members, including myself, that life at Hogwarts should return to normal. However, there will be a few minor changes. As a special treat, this year's exams have been cancelled. All students, including OWLs and NEWTs students, will receive a mark from their teachers based on their performance throughout the year instead, as a recognition of the fact that Hogwarts has not been conducive to study this year."

More cheering this time. In fact, the only person not cheering was Hermione, who was looking rather disappointed.

"All that revision for nothing!" she complained.

Harry and Ron both shook their heads.

"Hermione, you're nuts," said Ron, not without affection.

Dumbledore moved on to his next point.

"Lessons shall continue as usual, until the end of term. However, there shall be no further lessons in Defence Against the Dark Arts this year as Professor Lockhart has unfortunately been involved in a regrettable accident resulting in total amnesia, and is

thus unable to teach." This time the cheers nearly lifted the roof off, as quite a few of the teachers joined in. And at the staff table, observers were treated to the rare sight of Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall actually turning to each other, and smiling like old friends.

And then Dumbledore arrived at his final point.

"It only remains to thank and reward the brave, cunning and sublimely talented students who were responsible for saving the school from closure and apprehending the villain of the piece. Each of them will receive a Special Award for Services to the School. For being the first to work out how the attacks were being committed, come forward Miss Hermione Granger."

Hermione got to her feet, her face a bright shade of pink as she went up to get her award.

"But I didn't really do anything!" she gasped as she shook the Headmaster's hand.

"You saved Miss Lovegood's life," Dumbledore replied. "And that in turn saved Miss Martin. I think that deserves some kind of recognition, don't you?"

Hermione didn't answer as she took the silver shield, rather embarrassed at being singled out yet at the same time immensely proud as she slipped back to the Gryffindor table.

"Next, for being the first to work out who was behind the attacks, and for providing the means by which they were halted, Miss Marlene Lovegood."

No shyness or modesty here! Flinging back her hair, Marlie leapt to her feet and strutted up to the front as if it was only her natural right to be there. She accepted the award with a smile and turned to the applauding school, holding her necklace up for them all to see.

"Not just a pretty face, am I?" she purred, before sauntering equally leisurely back to her seat, soaking up the applause on the way.

"Next, for organising the raid that finally put paid to the attacks once and for all, Miss Rianne Stormosi."

Rianne accepted hers with good grace, bowing to the audience and returning to her seat as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

"For providing vital moral support and magical back up, Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Deanna Tyler."

Ron and Deanna got up simultaneously for theirs, reaching the front at the same time. Deanna waited patiently as Ron got his, before accepting her own from the Headmaster in turn. As he shook her hand, he leaned forward, whispering to her, "Well done, Deanna. You do your family proud."

"Thanks!" she smiled, it not occurring to her to wonder just why he was referring to her family when, as far as she knew, he was not a part of it. Mainly because out of the corner of her eye, she noted Professor Snape watching her, and the look of undisguised pride in his eyes wiped out every other thought from her mind. I did it, she thought. I made him proud of me. All I need to do now is set him up with Mum, and I'm set for life and a family! But maybe that was a task for next year.

Finally, Dumbledore turned to the last two silver awards on the staff table. No prizes for guessing who they were for.

"And last but certainly not least, prizes for those two students who actually did the immensely challenging, not to mention near-fatal, job of rescuing Ginny Weasley and halting the attacks. Mr. Harry Potter, Slayer of the Basilisk, and Miss Luella Martin, Exorcisor of Lord Voldemort's school diary."

Harry and Luella both got to their feet, shaking like mad but supremely happy. And as they received their awards, the boy and girl, Gryffindor and Slytherin, met each other's eyes. And then, totally spontaneously, Harry stepped forward and hesitantly held out his hand. Luella took it, shook his hand, and looked straight into his eyes.

And promptly found herself abandoning all normal Slytherin reserve as she pulled him forward into a hug, giving him a kiss on the cheek before letting him go.

Harry staggered back in shock, rearranging his glasses, trying to ignore the smirking and giggling coming from the Gryffindor table.

"Thanks!" he gasped, breathless.

"Don't mention it, mate." Luella grinned, before turning to go to her own table. However, Dumbledore prevented her.

"Not yet, Miss Martin. There is one more thing to present." Dumbledore cleared his throat before continuing. "It has been decided to present the House Cup now, instead of waiting until the end of term. And one of you will need to collect it on behalf of your house."

Harry and Luella exchanged glances. This could mean trouble. Last night had united the two rival houses in a way that transcended all the normal petty squabbles. Presenting the house trophy now could only re-open all the old wounds. Was the fragile state of peace to be broken so soon?

"Now," said Dumbledore, "as it currently stands, Gryffindor leads Slytherin by fifty points. However, I have a few more points to give out."

All along the Slytherin table, students began to groan. This had happened last year, and Slytherin had seen the Cup snatched from them by a mere ten points, earned by Neville Longbottom of all people. However, this time Gryffindor were leading, and it had not escaped a few of the more observant Slytherins that the rescue party had been three-fifths Slytherin. So it was that not a few ears were pricked in anticipation.

"To Miss Hermione Granger and Miss Marlene Lovegood, twenty points each."

Cheering broke out at this, but it was strangely muted. No change in the relative positions of the two houses.

"To Miss Rianne Stormosi, Miss Deanna Tyler and Mr. Ronald Weasley, fifty points each."

The Gryffindor table applauded, but they found themselves drowned out by the Slytherins, who had wasted no time in doing the necessary maths.

"We're level!" Marlie shrieked. She wasn't alone. All along the table, Slytherins were shouting, clapping and generally patting each other on the back.

Dumbledore smiled genially as he waited for the applause to die down. Finally, the hall was quiet enough for him to speak once more.

"And finally, to Mr. Harry Potter and Miss Luella Martin..." He paused, watching the entire school perched on the edge of their seats. "One hundred points each."

The school erupted into cheering as the implications dawned on everyone. There was no outright winner. It was... a draw.

"Which means," Dumbledore continued, "that the final scores are exactly level. And, as is customary on these occasions..."

"Scissors, paper, stone to decide the winner!" Fred yelled from the Gryffindor table.

Dumbledore smiled at him. "No, not scissors, paper, stone."

"Arm wrestling?" suggested George.

"No," said Dumbledore. "Given that we have a draw on our hands, the only fair solution is to award the House Cup jointly to both Houses. Miss Martin, Mr. Potter, if you could come and collect the trophy?"

Harry and Luella both stepped forward in a state of shock as the school went nuts around them, and the banners changed into a riot of green and silver, red and gold. The Cup was waiting, with ribbons of both sets of house colours tied to it. And as Harry and Luella lifted the trophy together, the school, as one, got to its feet to give them a standing ovation.

"Now this is what I call a victory!" Luella whispered.

"Even when it's a draw?" asked Harry, grinning.

Luella smiled at him. "Well, you know. It wouldn't feel right claiming an outright victory. Not when we both know you were needed as much I was. Who knows, maybe more."

Harry had to agree. This was the best result, indeed, the fairest result. Honours were even. Victory, rather than a prize to be jealously fought over, was one to be shared. A quick look at the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables confirmed that everyone seemed to be thinking the same. Even Malfoy was quietly applauding, with not a glare of malice in sight. It was, without a doubt, the most eagerly heralded draw in Hogwarts history.

"Shame we have to go back to separate tables," Luella remarked.

"Then let's not," said Harry.

Luella looked at him in surprise. "Why, what did you have in mind?"

Harry indicated the Gryffindors and Slytherins, many of whom were now leaving their tables and swarming towards them.

"How about a victory parade? A joint one, obviously."

"Like we have any choice?" Luella sighed, as the massed throng of Slytherins and Gryffindors reached them and promptly started hugging them, patting them on the back, singing "For S/he's A Jolly Good Fellow" and generally mobbing them. Luella found the cup being taken off her by Marlie and Fred, who promptly began passing it around to everyone in sight. We'll never see it again, she thought wryly. However, she didn't have time to think about the cup's eventual fate. Mike Lovegood and Marcus Flint had just materialised on either side of her and hoisted her on to their shoulders, with Deanna and Rianne encouraging them.

"Careful there!" Rianne warned them. "Last thing you want is to drop the Saviour of Slytherin."

"As if we would!" Mike called cheerfully, before almost proving Rianne right as he walked into the Hufflepuff table. Fortunately, Flint prevented Luella from falling.

"Lovegood, you idiot!"

"Sorry, Flinty."

"Sorry won't save you from the wrath of Our Lady of Slytherin, will it?" Flint snapped at him.

"Who's that?" asked Luella.

"You, you fool." Flint grunted as he adjusted his shoulder to support her weight.
"Now hold still. You've got a crowd to wave to."

Fred and George, not to be outdone, had done likewise with Harry, carrying him on their shoulders, with the lid of the House Cup on his head. And with that, Slytherin and Gryffindor united in one riot of colour, the rejoicing students made their way outside for what promised to be the party of the decade.

Severus Snape and Minerva McGonagall watched them go.

"Reckon there's any chance of getting any work out of them today?" Minerva asked half-heartedly.

"Not a chance," yawned Severus. "Any minute now, Marlene Lovegood will wheel out the Slytherin stereo system and then we can kiss any productivity goodbye."

"I just saw her slip off towards the dungeons with Ginny Weasley and her friends," said Minerva.

"I rest my case."

Minerva looked at the doorway which the four Slytherins had left by. "Oh dear." Getting up, she picked up her hat and planted it on her head very firmly. "That settles it. I am not putting up with what the younger generation seems to think passes for music all day. Come on, Severus. We're going down the pub."

"What?" Severus asked, as he found himself dragged to his feet.

"I said, we're going down the pub," Minerva repeated. "We're leaving them to it. Come on, let's go. Don't tell me you want to listen to that music with rocks in all day."

"Well, no," Severus admitted. He looked thoughtful for a moment, before giving in with a smile. "Alright then. Let's go. Just don't get drunk on me, will you? I don't want a repeat of the staff Christmas party of two years ago."

Minerva went rather pink at this. However, her blushes were saved by Caitlin Tyler's arrival.

"Where are you two off to then?" she enquired. "Anywhere interesting? Or are you joining the party?"

"We're going to the Three Broomsticks," Severus informed her. "Fleeing the invasion of the Things from Planet Youth Culture."

Caitlin patted his arm. "You'll adapt to the twentieth century sooner or later." She looked rather strangely at them both. "Hang on, did you say you were going down the pub? That's not like you both."

"Well, if it provides a sanctuary from the rabble..." Minerva started to say, but Severus interrupted her.

"It's a date," he told her, completely straight-faced. "Minerva's been feeling rather lonely lately, as have I, so we've decided to embark on a torrid affair."

"Severus!" Minerva shrieked, this time going from pink to a deep shade of vermillion.

"Sorry, Minerva, but the world had to know sooner or later," Severus replied breezily. "I've never been a toy-boy before, it's quite a novel experience."

Caitlin wasn't quite sure whether to believe him or not. However, she knew Severus well enough to guess when he was teasing.

"Congratulations to you both then," she remarked with a smile. "Just one thing. On no account should you let him drink anything stronger than a Butterbeer shandy - he has this disturbing tendency to strip naked after a few drinks and start singing 'Slytherins Are Sexier' with a pointy hat clutched to his, er, gentleman's bits."

"Caitlin!" snapped Severus. "Stop it!"

"I will when you will," she smiled innocently.

"Stop it, both of you!" said Minerva firmly. "Honestly, you haven't changed a bit, either of you, forever bickering and teasing each other!"

Severus and Caitlin both smiled rather indulgently at this.

"Now that takes me back a few years," said Caitlin.

"Almost like being back at school," Severus agreed.

"We are," Caitlin pointed out.

"But not as students, thankfully," sighed Minerva.

"Indeed," came the cheery voice of Albus Dumbledore. "But nevertheless, it's nice to see you both back on your usual terms. Makes a change from recent behaviour."

Severus froze immediately, while Caitlin looked guiltily away. Somehow, he must have found out what had happened between them earlier. And yet, he didn't seem to be blaming anyone. Much to both Caitlin and Severus's relief.

"I'd better be going," said Caitlin, just a little too brightly. "I need to get back to work, I only came here to drop Luella's things off."

"Not at all," Dumbledore replied. "I've already updated Melissa and she's given you the day off. Which you're going to spend with us."

"I am?" asked Caitlin in a daze.

"Certainly!" laughed Dumbledore. "You're joining me, and Minerva and Severus in Hogsmeade, where we're going for a celebratory drink." He extended a hand to her, inviting her to join them. Resigned to the inevitable, and secretly rather pleased to be invited, Caitlin decided to accept.

"Alright then," she grinned as she allowed herself to be led away. Dumbledore smiled, and took Minerva by the arm, leaving Caitlin and Severus together. Severus extended an arm to her.

"May I have the pleasure?"

"Sure Minerva won't get jealous?" she teased as she slipped her arm around his.

"Hardly," he replied. "I'm not really one for older women, after all."

"Oh, I knew that," Caitlin smiled. "Besides, it wouldn't be Minerva McGonagall anyway."

"And why is that?" Severus enquired.

"She's been seeing Madam Hooch since before you started teaching here," Caitlin grinned.

"What?" snapped Severus. "Is that true?"

"Absolutely," Caitlin nodded. "Albus told me himself."

"Good gods," Severus sighed. "The things that go on in this place that no one ever tells me about! You'll be telling me George Flitwick and Libitina Vector are an item next. No," he held up a finger as she started to speak, still with that same grin on her face, "don't tell me. I'd rather not know that the staff room is a seething hotbed of lust, and that everyone except me and Binns is getting some."

"It doesn't have to be that way," she said softly, before quickly looking away, wondering what on earth had possessed her. "Oh look, Severus, I'm sorry, forget I said anything."

Severus stopped walking, and turned to look at her. For a long while, he just stared into her eyes, his face giving nothing away. When he did speak, it was in firm, measured, very controlled tones.

"Caitlin, right now, I happen to be in a very good mood. Let's not spoil it. Let's just enjoy ourselves for once. Let's just have an enjoyable day out. Just this once."

Caitlin smiled, inwardly rather relieved. "Sounds good to me. Shall we go?" She took his arm once more, and together, the two of them left the Great Hall, and headed out into the sunshine.

FINIS

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